FROM THE PLANNING COMMISSIONERS JOURNAL

Now that You're on Board:

How to Survive ... and Thrive ... as a Planning Commissioner

by Elaine Cogan

Now that You're On Board

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About the Planning Commissioners Journal

The *Planning Commissioners Journal* is a quarterly publication for citizens across the U.S. and Canada interested in local planning and development issues.

The *PCJ*'s columns and articles provide clear and concise introductions to key planning & zoning topics. Effective planning boards and commissions depend on well-informed members. The goal of the *Planning Commissioners Journal* is to provide information that will help citizen planners better understand the challenging issues they face.

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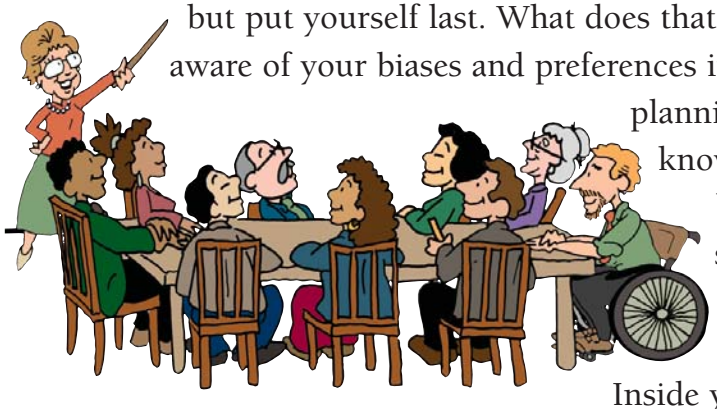
Introduction

Since 1991, Elaine Cogan has been sharing her wisdom and experience with *Planning Commissioners Journal* readers in her column, "The Effective Planning Commissioner." Elaine has tackled a wide range of subjects with common sense and practical advice.

A few years ago, we asked our columnists what their single most important piece of advice for planning commissioners would be. Here's what Elaine (succinctly, as usual) had to say: "Know yourself first, but put yourself last. What does that mean? Be self-critical, aware of your biases and preferences in terms of the issues the planning board faces. After you know and understand yourself, be willing – if needed – to set personal opinions aside to serve the best interests of your community."



Inside you'll find 25 practical tips for planning board members, some condensed from Elaine's past columns, others new. We hope that Elaine's insights – along with the sidebar comments from a number of citizen and professional planners – will help you not just "*survive*," but "*thrive*" on your planning commission.

Wayne Senville – Editor, *Planning Commissioners Journal*

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C O N T E N T S

Editor's Note: inside you'll find references to articles by Elaine Cogan and others published in the *Planning Commissioners Journal* (the *PCJ*). To save space, we've abbreviated these references to include the article's title and the *PCJ* issue number in which it was published. Most articles are available to download for a small charge from our PlannersWeb site: www.plannersweb.com. To locate an article, just enter its title in the Search box.

New to the Board

"Controversy is an inevitable part of the planning process. How you deal with it is an important measure of your effectiveness."

New to the Board

Controversial Issues: A Natural Part of Planning

There probably is not a community in this land that has ever thought of erecting a statue in honor of a planning commissioner!

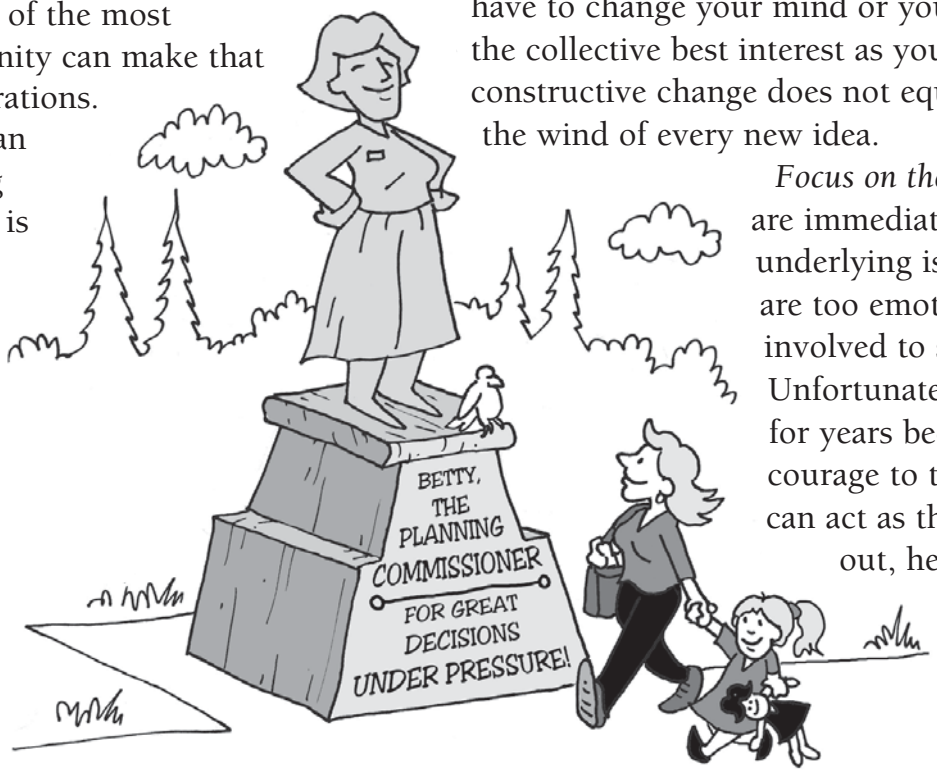
As unrecognized men and women, you should be proud of your contributions to some of the most important decisions a community can make that broaden its horizons and aspirations. Unfortunately, controversy is an inevitable part of the planning process. How you deal with it is an important measure of your effectiveness.

If you do not lose sight of the fact that you are a member of the community and keep tuned in to its priorities, you should not be surprised when an action or potential one becomes controversial.

Deal with likely contentious issues early. Meet with citizens informally in their neighborhoods or service clubs, city hall, or town library, and bring along staff to explain any technical aspects. Listen actively to what people tell you, giving them many opportunities to air their views in non-confrontational situations.

Do not make any promises you cannot deliver. Consider citizen comments carefully, but do not necessarily feel you have to change your mind or your vote if it is based on the collective best interest as you see it. Being open to constructive change does not equate with bending with the wind of every new idea.

Focus on the real issues. There often are immediate concerns and underlying issues – and some citizens are too emotional or personally involved to see the difference. Unfortunately, some problems fester for years because no one has the courage to tackle them directly. You can act as the catalyst to sorting them out, helping make needed short-range decisions, and agreeing on a process for dealing with the others.



The most effective commissioners are comfortable with their roles as laypeople who make planning decisions. They understand the technical aspects of what they are required to do while still bringing "real world" experiences and concerns to the table. After listening to all sides, your ultimate challenge when dealing with controversy is to feel comfortable with your decision, even if it is unpopular, and then to do all you can to ensure that animosities and disagreements do not linger once the decision is made.

It should not require accolades to give you satisfaction that you are an effective and important bridge between the public and the sometimes esoteric, puzzling, and even controversial world of planning. ☒

A Nose for NIMBYs

"Don't worry if you are missing your favorite science-fiction show to conduct a public hearing at the Planning Commission. You may be lucky enough to see shape-shifters in real life. If you are considering a land use change that will affect a residential neighborhood, perfectly normal, rational people will grow fangs and acquire the ability to spit fire.

Changes in the neighborhood spark a primitive reaction in defense of home and family. As a planning commissioner, you need to keep your cool when confronted by angry neighbors, and recognize the difference between legitimate concerns and irrational fears. You need a nose for NIMBYs.

Your job is to look out for the whole community: townhouse dwellers as well as single family residents, and people living on through streets as well as those who want to live on dead-ends and put the traffic on other streets.

Ask questions or have staff find the information you need to evaluate the concerns. Is the traffic going to be greater than the standards for the street? Is the proposed land use so noxious that it would reduce property values, or is it simply something different from what's there? Were the 'promises' made by a city representative or by a realtor? If the concerns don't hold up, don't feel guilty about voting in favor of the project.

NIMBYs can have their positive side. No one else is so highly motivated to do research into the issues and the history of the area. Sometimes in their quest to stop a project, people will uncover information that does help your decision-making. Sometimes there's an alternative that makes more sense. If these concerns have substance, respond to them; don't treat a project as a 'done deal.'

It's easy to feel sorry for the beleaguered neighbors and do something that's not in the interest of the community as a whole. It's also easy to react the other way and dig in your heels in response to annoying and pushy people, just to show them you can't be bullied. Try to separate the personalities from the substance of what they're saying.

With a good nose, you will be able to tell when people cease making legitimate points and slide into NIMBYism. Make a note of the good points, and ignore the rest."

From Chris Robbins' "A Nose for NIMBYs," in PCJ #51

Show Respect to All

As a planning commissioner, you have the obligation to be polite and fair to all the citizens in your community: newcomers and oldtimers, people you agree with as well as those you would never invite to dinner.

Though the worst personal traits often come out at public hearings, people are not necessarily wrong just because they are angry, obstreperous and noisy, do not speak English well, or are confused about bureaucratic procedures. As annoying as they may be, try to overlook these so that you can understand and respond to the substance of their comments.

It is important that you show respect to the questioner even when you doubt the question. People ask stupid questions … hostile ones … tough ones … all of which you and your colleagues should answer as well as you can, but always respectfully. Sometimes, you and a citizen will have to "agree to disagree," but you should never show anger or lose your temper.

Whenever you are holding a public hearing or meeting, it is important to be aware of the nonverbal clues, behavior, or habits that may seem to indicate your inattentiveness or rudeness. You send a negative message to the public when you slouch in your chair or lean back so far you appear to be bored or dozing.

Likewise, they may be suspicious about what you are going to do with all your notes if you scribble constantly. Sit up straight, look at the person speaking, nod affirmatively, and otherwise show your interest. This becomes more difficult the later the hour, just the incentive you may need to call a halt to the proceedings and start fresh another day.

Do not chat with other commissioners or staff when a member of the public addresses the commission. While you may be discussing the subject at hand or have another legitimate purpose, you appear to be dismissing what the public has to say without really hearing it. Another habit to avoid is drumming your fingers or a pencil on the table as if you are impatient to get this all over with.

These are some of the most common forms of annoying or distracting behavior. You may know others. The important point to remember is just as you want to be treated with respect, the public deserves no less when dealing with you and the other board members. ☒

"Please add the annoyance of commissioners (or applicants or staff) who do not turn off their cell phones. There is nothing more disruptive than to have a commissioner conduct a telephone conversation, or walk out of the room to take a call, when an applicant or the public is trying to present their points. It falls under the category of side conversations. It is disrespectful.

A less frequent annoyance is the rolling break. When the hearings get long and go into late hours, take a break and let the public know it. Commissioners have sometimes stepped out individually to get food or go to the restroom. That is not fair to the public. They want your undivided attention."

–Michael Dove, St. Petersburg, Florida

When They Speak Do You Listen?

"A clear clue that their minds are made up and the so-called 'discussion' is a farce is when planning commissioners read remarks obviously written beforehand."

From Elaine Cogan's "There's Help for Dysfunctional Meetings," in PCJ #17

"Don't indicate by word or action how you intend to vote during the portion of the hearing devoted to presentations by the applicant, presentations by any persons appearing in objection, and comments by members of the staff. During this period your body is the judge and the jury and it is no more appropriate for you to express an opinion as to the proper decision, prior to hearing all of the testimony, than it would be for a judge or jury member to announce his firm conviction in the middle of a court trial regarding the guilt or innocence of the defendant. This is not clearly understood by a majority of persons sitting on hearing bodies.

It is not too difficult to phrase one's questions or comments in a manner that implies that you are seeking information rather than stating an irrefutable fact and that your mind is closed to further argument."

From "The Riggins Rules," in PCJ #13

Ask Questions Until You Get Answers

It is midway through a rather routine planning board meeting. Until now, you have been considering issues that seem to be of more concern to technicians than to the public. Suddenly, you perk up. Next on the agenda is a presentation from an out-of-town developer, flanked by an articulate architect and well-connected local lawyers.

After a few formalities, they turn on their electronic show and urge you to approve the plans for their proposed development – today. Wow! The streets never looked as attractive, the kids never happier, the sun never brighter as in their digitally-enhanced pictures. Their spreadsheets, pro formas, and other data also seem overwhelmingly positive.

Do not be surprised when applicants present their proposals in the best light. That's their job. Your responsibility as a planning commissioner is to get to the facts behind the pretty pictures and enticing words.

Avoid being overwhelmed by highly polished presentations. The color slides are enticing … but there are no trees on the property today and the ones they show are twenty feet tall. What will the project really look like next year or the year after? Do the math yourself. After adding up the square footage of all the condos they anticipate, is the development more dense than their figures suggest?

Speak up. Ask questions. Do not be pressured into making a precipitous decision even if the applicants earnestly plead for action now. They may say that their option on the property is running out or the financing is in jeopardy. Perhaps another community is begging them to locate there and yours needs more economic development. Resist the

Do not be surprised when applicants present their proposals in the best light. That's their job. Your responsibility as a planning commissioner is to get to the facts behind the pretty pictures and enticing words.

blandishments or threats. Your sole concern should be your community's interest, not theirs. None of these are reasons to make a decision … either to approve or deny in haste. But neither is it fair to prolong the matter unduly.

Pressure to make a decision may come from others in the community, not just the applicant. Opposing citizens may pack the meeting, wearing buttons or waving placards. They may disparage the applicant's claims and urge you to "just say no." They are as entitled to their say as is the applicant.

Use your staff as a resource. But if the project is complex and your staff does not have the expertise to answer all your questions, consider hiring a consultant for a neutral, professional review. It is worth the expense. Be sure to visit the site, ask your questions, get the answers, and then be willing to make a decision. Earn respect by insisting on and acting in the public interest. ☒

Ask the Hard Questions

"My favorite is, 'Is this just your idea, or do you have any evidence to back it up?' No category of comment is more common at a zoning hearing than unsubstantiated 'fact.' Comments like, 'It will decrease my property values,' or 'The traffic impacts will hardly be noticeable' will plague you all your days. Sift through the testimony for relevant planning information corroborated by evidence. Keep in mind that aside from expert witnesses, and without evidence, one person's opinion is just about as valid as another's. Be fair, but be discriminating in what you choose to accept as truth."

From Steven R. Burt's "Being a Planning Commissioner," in PCJ #24

Rational Evaluation

"Elaine Cogan highlights the difference between rational and peripheral evaluation. Commissioners engaging in rational evaluation carefully consider the facts and arguments, assess the reasoning, and then reach a logical conclusion about the merits of the project. Rather than risk information overload, however, many people engage in peripheral evaluation, looking at external factors such as whether the speaker is likable or the presentation is impressive to decide whether to reject or accept the assertions being made. One of the most dangerous peripheral conclusions for a commissioner to reach: presuming that since 'everyone' seems to hate the proposed development, it must be a bad project."

–Debra H. Stein, President, GCA Strategies, San Francisco

Be Open to Verbal as Well as Written Information

Most planning commissioners are inundated with piles of documents, many written in legal or planning jargon. While you cannot act responsibly if you do not read this material carefully, you shortchange yourself if you base your opinions only on written information. You can add richly to your store of knowledge if you are willing to exchange ideas freely – among commissioners, between commissioners and staff, and with the public. However, the benefit from such verbal interchange can be impaired if you do not listen with an open and receptive attitude.

Do you "really" hear all sides? Do you automatically assume that a developer is motivated only by greed when he proposes to cut down an ancient tree, or that an environmentalist has no concerns about economic growth when advocating saving a wetland? A "guilty before proven" attitude prevents you from understanding others' points of view and adding to your understanding of complex issues.

Does your body language reveal your real thoughts? There are many non-verbal ways to express yourself that belie "nice" or friendly words. Among these signals are frowning, rolling your eyes, and inattentiveness. If your actions do not complement your words, people may become resentful and angry, thus preventing free and open dialogue.

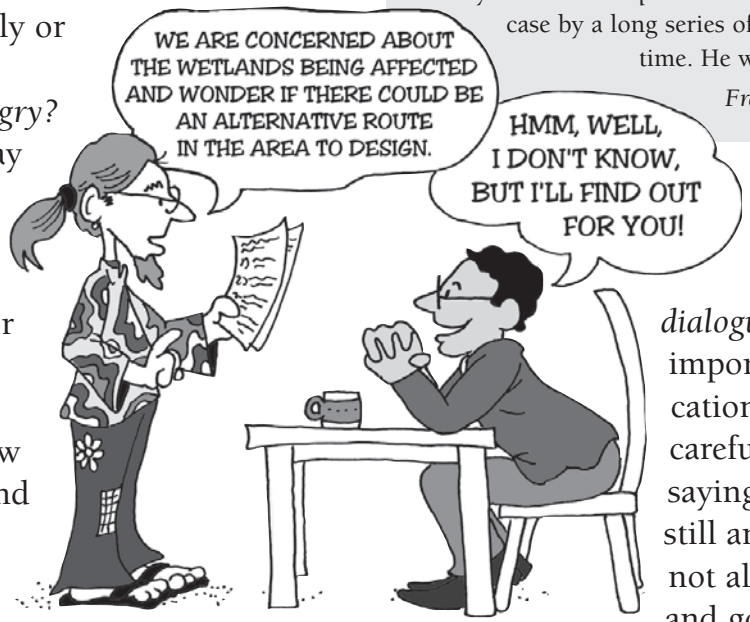
Do you state your opinions so strongly that you discourage others from disagreeing? In most conversations, you gain an advantage if you use a conciliatory tone of voice, such as, "It seems to me," or "As I look at the situation."

Do you and the other commissioners sincerely welcome and encourage citizen input … or do you really wish they would all just go away and let you tend to the business to which you were appointed?

There may be times you have to express your position in unequivocal terms, but if you are willing to be open-minded, most often people will listen and take notice when you do feel strongly or uncompromisingly about an issue.

Is your tone of voice sarcastic or angry? No matter what you say, how you say it is very important. Avoid talking in such a way that others will feel compelled to side with someone else just because you are insulting or demeaning.

Are you reluctant to say, "I don't know"? These three little words show you are willing to admit fallibility and take responsibility for it. To have genuine credibility, however, the admittance should be followed up with, "But I will find out for you." Then, make sure you do.



Do you hold a monologue or a dialogue? This is perhaps the most important aspect of good communication. In a true dialogue, you listen carefully to what the other person is saying and respond appropriately. It is still another signal you realize you are not always the repository of truth and goodness. ☒

Listen!

"Listening well means putting your own thoughts on the shelf (for a time) and concentrating all of your energy on understanding someone else. It isn't necessary to agree with them, but it is important to be accepting and approachable."

From Ilene Watson's "Listen!" in PCJ #51

"Don't interrupt a presentation until the question period, except for very short and necessary clarifying remarks or queries. Most applicants have arranged their remarks in a logical sequence and the thing about which you are so concerned will probably be covered if you can force yourself to be quiet for a few minutes. You can wreck his whole case by a long series of unnecessary questions at the wrong time. He will be your enemy forever."

From "The Riggins Rules," in PCJ #13

Reaching Out

"No one can be more effective than a citizen planning commissioner when presenting information about planning to a group of citizens."

Reaching Out

Different Ways to Gauge Public Opinion

How do you and the other planning commissioners keep your figurative fingers on the pulse of your community? There are many ways to ascertain public attitudes. Choose those that best suit your local planning issues and take the results seriously. Surveys, questionnaires, and other techniques are described below.

Scientific survey. This is generally the most reliable opinion research tool – and the most costly. They are usually conducted by phone calls to a statistically valid sample of the population. As the client, you should keep close control over the content of the questions to make sure they cover the issues you want to query. It is often helpful, at an additional fee, to poll a subset of the population such as low-income residents or people from a specific geographical area.

Written questionnaires. These can be duplicated and distributed broadly, with minimal cost. The questions should be unambiguous and factual, neutrally worded, and relatively easy to answer. As the respondents are self-selected, it is important to find a way, such as asking for zip codes, to recognize whether one group is overrepresented in the replies.

Focus groups. Facilitated discussions usually involve no more than 10 or 12 participants, chosen to represent specific segments of the population. The validity of the results is dependent to a great extent on how accurately their opinions reflect those they represent. The skill of the discussion leader in soliciting information from a roomful of strangers is very important.

On-the-street interviews. Paying interviewers or soliciting volunteers to query people on the street, in malls, or at supermarkets is a marginally useful technique. The questions must necessarily be brief and require simple answers, and many people are too busy or suspicious to stop and talk. The primary value of this technique is less in the results and more in spreading the word that the planning board is

genuinely interested in public opinion.

Internet dialogue. Electronic town halls sponsored by local governments are becoming increasingly popular, and can provide a vehicle for obtaining feedback on various planning issues. Structure the conversation by providing a written questionnaire and keeping a tally of the answers, but also encourage an exchange of opinions. Though this technique allows you to answer questions from a variety of people and thus exhibit an openness to new ideas, it is important to guard against becoming defensive or belligerent.

Presentations and feedback. Whenever commission members and staff give speeches or presentations to community groups, include a time for questions. Have a staff person or volunteer keep a summary of audience comments and review them afterward as still another way to test public opinion.

Letters to the editor. Though only the most motivated people usually take the time to write, and they may be zealots or advocates for one point of view, this is yet another window into how people feel about an issue.

No single technique is sufficient in giving you and the commission a thorough understanding of public opinion on planning issues. It is best to use as many as you can, tailoring them to your situation and budget. ☒

Citizen Surveys

"A growing number of communities are augmenting traditional meetings and forums with citizen surveys. Surveys are far more successful in capturing the typical community resident and making that resident's opinion part of the community calculus.

A scientifically conducted survey of residents brings in the voice of the public like no forum, newspaper straw poll, or focused discussion. Whether conducted by phone or mail, a good citizen survey will provide the perspective of residents who are not the 'usual suspects.'

Citizen surveys can be simple one-shot assessments of resident policy preferences. More valuable, however, is a citizen survey program – with periodic public surveys designed to track changing community demographics; evaluate quality of life and quality of community services; and measure the extent to which various community facilities and programs are being used.

In support of comprehensive plan updates, citizen surveys often include a set of general questions about the quality of life in the community and in neighborhoods. Questions like, 'Taking all things into consideration, how would you rate your quality of life in Our Town?' Other general questions deal with residents' perceptions about Our Town as a place to raise children or as a place to retire, and opportunities for shopping, dining, volunteering, entertainment, and so on.

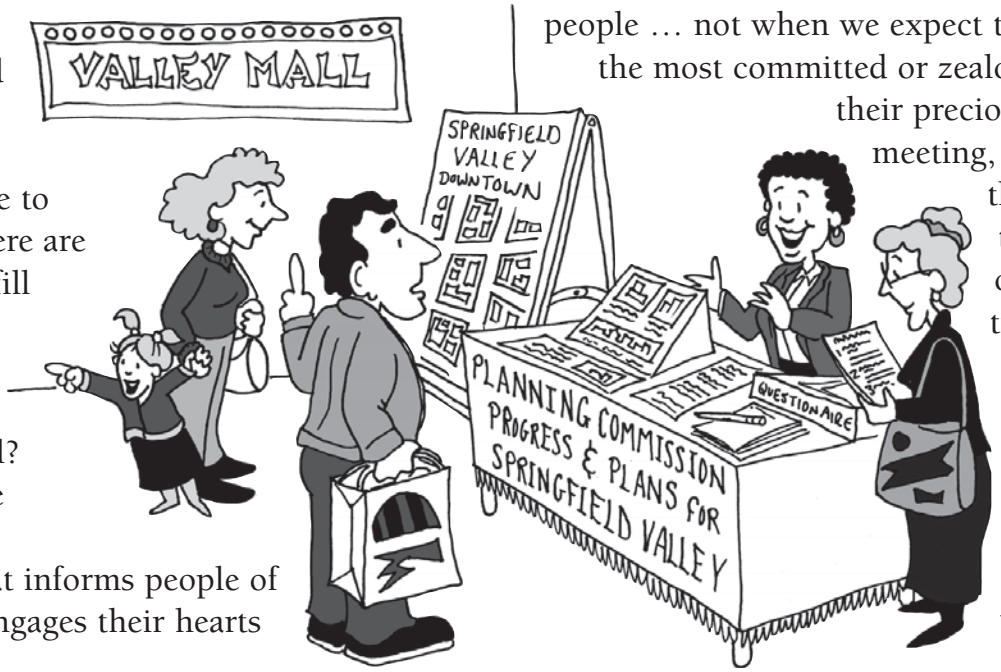
This can help create a baseline of information to be monitored as land use decisions are made and changed over the years. Furthermore, if done correctly, the survey can provide results for different parts of the community so that better facility and policy targeting can occur."

From Thomas Miller's "Citizen Surveys," in PCJ #35

Go Where the People Are

It is a sunny Saturday afternoon. As usual, throngs of people are at the local mall, shopping, strolling, greeting their friends and neighbors. Prominent among the storefronts, and attracting considerable attention, is something new: a display about Our Town … what it is and what it might become, depending on the planning decisions that soon will be made.

Mounted attractively on tabletop boards are photos and drawings and easy-to-read text about alternatives. Staff in leisurely dress is available to answer questions and there are brief comment forms to fill out. There are even balloons for the kids. Why go to all that bother … and at the mall? Because that is where the people are!



Public involvement that informs people of their choices and truly engages their hearts and minds while remaining civil is increasingly difficult. People with strong opinions always will find ways to be heard. But isn't it at least as valuable, or even more informative, to learn what less vocal but still concerned folk think? In an ideal world, we can engage them before the controversy erupts, or perhaps diffuse it entirely with sound dialogue and conversation.

From more than 30 years experience designing and facilitating public participation processes, it is obvious to me that the most successful are those we take out to the people … not when we expect them to come to us. Only the most committed or zealous citizens will spend their precious time at a public meeting, no matter how important the planning board or staff thinks it is. There are many other ways. Consider these tips as part of your job.

As noted above, regularly display easy-to-read information at the local library, mall, or community center, ideally with staff present, always with opportunities for the

Talk to businesspeople and community activists at their civic clubs and in church basements. Take the issues to them and listen to what they tell you.

public to write down their comments.

Reach out with speeches and presentations. Deal with neighborhood concerns in the affected neighborhoods, meeting in living rooms, libraries, and schools. Talk to businesspeople and community activists at their civic clubs and in church basements. Take the issues to them and listen to what they tell you. This cannot displace your legally required public hearings, but does provide valuable additional forums.

Use the Internet actively. Nearly every community has a Web site, some more ambitious and attractive than others. Post your information there and invite (and answer) comments and questions, honestly and regularly. Read what bloggers say about community issues.

These ideas are just starters. What works in your community? Ask this uncommonly discussed question and you will think of many creative ideas. Most importantly, you will reach people who may never otherwise be involved in civic activity. ☒

The Same Ten or Twenty People

"Montgomery County, which covers 360 square miles in rural southwestern Virginia, has a population of 86,000. Yet as the process for updating the comprehensive plan got underway, it was 'the same ten or twenty people who were showing up at our public meetings.' As Meghan Dorsett, the county's comprehensive planner, admits, 'the public participation process was failing miserably.'

Instead of throwing in the towel, the planning commission embarked on what Dorsett terms 'evangelical planning.' They decided to pull out all the stops in going out and getting county residents actively involved in the planning process.

The first step, as Dorsett relates, was to make sure 'every possible group or organization heard about the planning process.' That meant contacting not just neighborhood organizations, but service clubs, churches, African-American organizations, women's groups, public schools, and even bowling leagues.

Second, each group was asked if they'd be willing to distribute a survey, and discuss community issues, at one of their organization's own meetings.

But to make the process work, one other key step was taken. Dorsett asked each group to designate one of their own members to serve as their meeting's facilitator – and invited each 'community facilitator' to first attend a training session on the planning process.

Eighty-eight groups ended up participating [and] a volunteer facilitator ran each meeting. … As the plan was being developed, many of the facilitators continued to actively participate by serving on one of the eight workgroups set up to draft the plan. … One last fringe benefit: three newly appointed planning commissioners got their first taste of planning as community facilitators."

From "Bright Ideas," in PCJ #61

Speak Out

As a planning board member, you see first hand the beneficial effects of good planning in your community. You spend hours in meetings and hearings and brief yourself with reports and field trips. Still, how much do you know about what planning issues are on the minds of the average citizen? How much do they know about the planning process and how it works?

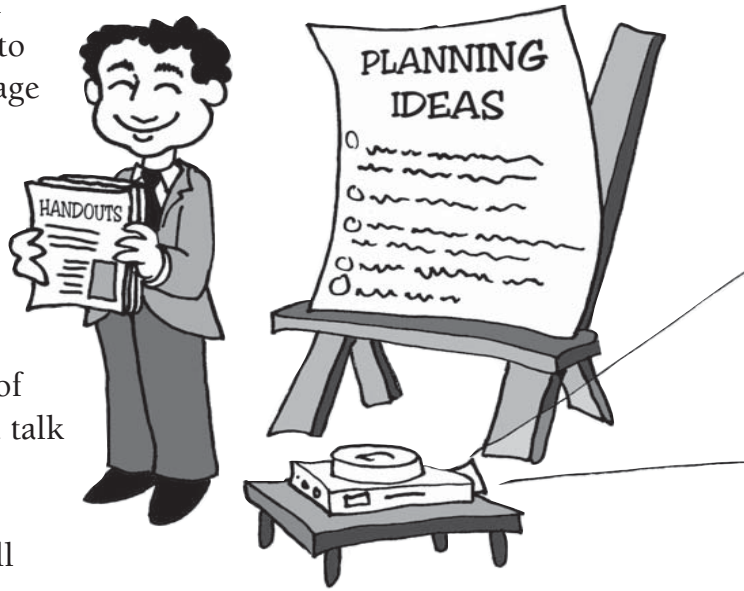
This two-way sharing of information is invaluable to your optimal performance, but it requires you and the other commissioners to move off the dais and into the community. Although it may take time away from your business or family, it can be limited, and it definitely will be worthwhile.

If you are fearful of giving a talk, think again. No one can be more effective than a citizen planning commissioner when presenting information about planning to a group of citizens.

Enlist staff to help you organize a speech, possibly accompanied by slides, on the benefits of planning to your community and current projects of interest. Make sure it is free of jargon and "plannerese," with examples to which people can relate. Show "before" and "after" pictures of how planning decisions have added to the quality of life in your community and talk about unfinished business. Practice until you are comfortable with the text and the technology.

When you are sufficiently prepared, ask staff to notify service and civic clubs that you and the other planning board members are available for presentations at their meetings. You will be surprised at how many take you up on the offer.

Your speech should be no more than 15 minutes, with time for questions. This allows listeners to clear up any ambiguities or points they may not understand and gives you additional opportunities to get your message across. Avoid arguments or feeling you should defend a specific decision, and of course, do not talk about any pending case.



Speak in well

No one can be more effective than a citizen planning commissioner when presenting information about planning to a group of citizens.

understood words and phrases. Even lay planning commissioners – if they have been around any length of time – can start talking in "plannerese." That's alright if your audience is staff or other commissioners.
It is not alright when talking to the public. Avoid jargon whenever you can, but if you must use words or acronyms such as infill, density bonuses, PUDs, or FAR (or others particular to your location), explain what they mean.

Staff can help with displays and technical data, but the message is most powerful when citizens such as yourselves talk to other citizens. You may be challenged by a few, but most will be glad you came to talk with them and welcome your open attitude and willingness to share information.

Reach out and speak out when there is no controversy and people will tend to trust you when the inevitable contentious times arise. ☒

More Suggestions

- Analyze the needs of your audience.
- Speak in well understood words and phrases.
- Use humor appropriately.
- Understand the importance of non-verbal signals in reinforcing your message.
- Respect the questioner even when you doubt the question.
- Do not promise more than you can deliver.
- Do not commit the commission or staff to any additional projects or work without first consulting them.
- One illustration is worth a thousand words – only if it is the right one.
- Remember that people are persuaded by people, not by information.

From Elaine Cogan's "You Too, Can Speak So People Will Listen!" in PCJ #25

The Eye of the Storm

"As a planning commissioner, you're at the eye of a ferocious storm that's sweeping the country – the storm of controversy over how our communities should grow. Always keep in mind what it means to be at the eye: You're in the only place of perfect calm."

From Dave Stauffer's "Smart Talk Aids Smart Growth," in PCJ #64

The Importance of Reaching Out

Does anyone on your planning staff or board speak or understand Russian? Laotian? Spanish? How well do you communicate with the non-English speaking members of your community? How good is your pipeline to their concerns and viewpoints?

If you are not already actively doing so, consider extending your reach to the citizens of your community for whom English is not their first language. Just because they do not attend planning hearings or meetings that are natural to you and others in the majority community, it is folly to believe they do not care, especially if they live in areas affected by your decisions.

Reaching out takes time and special effort. For example, before considering sensitive land use changes in an area where there has been little or no response to your familiar ways of communicating with citizens, do not give up. Contact church leaders, social workers, school principals, local business owners, and community leaders. Tell them you sincerely want to get a sense of the attitudes of the residents toward planning issues likely to be controversial or important to them.

Be prepared to be surprised and hear about concerns you may not have thought of. Pledge to take these into consideration when you deal with specific issues and give them feedback that shows you have listened, even if you feel you have to make a decision that may appear adverse to their interests.

Non-English speaking people may come from cultures less familiar with and even suspicious of the democratic give-and-take we take for granted. Expecting more absolutes from government, they may think it is useless or even dangerous to express

How well do you communicate with the non-English speaking members of your community?

contrary opinions. It takes patience to help them overcome these perceptions.

In a recent planning project, we were having no success reaching Spanish-speaking people through regular means. After talking with community leaders, we found that this closely knit community was not comfortable going outside their neighborhood for public meetings. Instead, it was suggested we come to their church after religious services. Enlisting the help of their pastor and a translator, we held a very successful meeting, and heard concerns we never would have anticipated, at 11:30 Sunday morning.

Other outreach efforts should include placing notices in community newspapers and translating information about meetings and proposed planning actions into their common language. Employ local translators whenever possible.

You make important planning decisions that affect those who speak English – and those who do not. By doing everything you can to mitigate the negative effects of cultural and language barriers, you will enrich your community and truly be able to say that you plan for all. ☒

The City of Vancouver, B.C., mails out planning notices in envelopes which clearly urge recipients to have the enclosed information translated. According to Robert Rippon of the Community Services Department, "The languages printed on our envelopes are as follows: in the left column top to bottom: English, French, Spanish & Vietnamese; in the right-hand column (again, top to bottom): Chinese, Japanese, Korean & Punjabi. These languages represent the major ethnic components of Vancouver."

Older Citizens Have Much to Offer

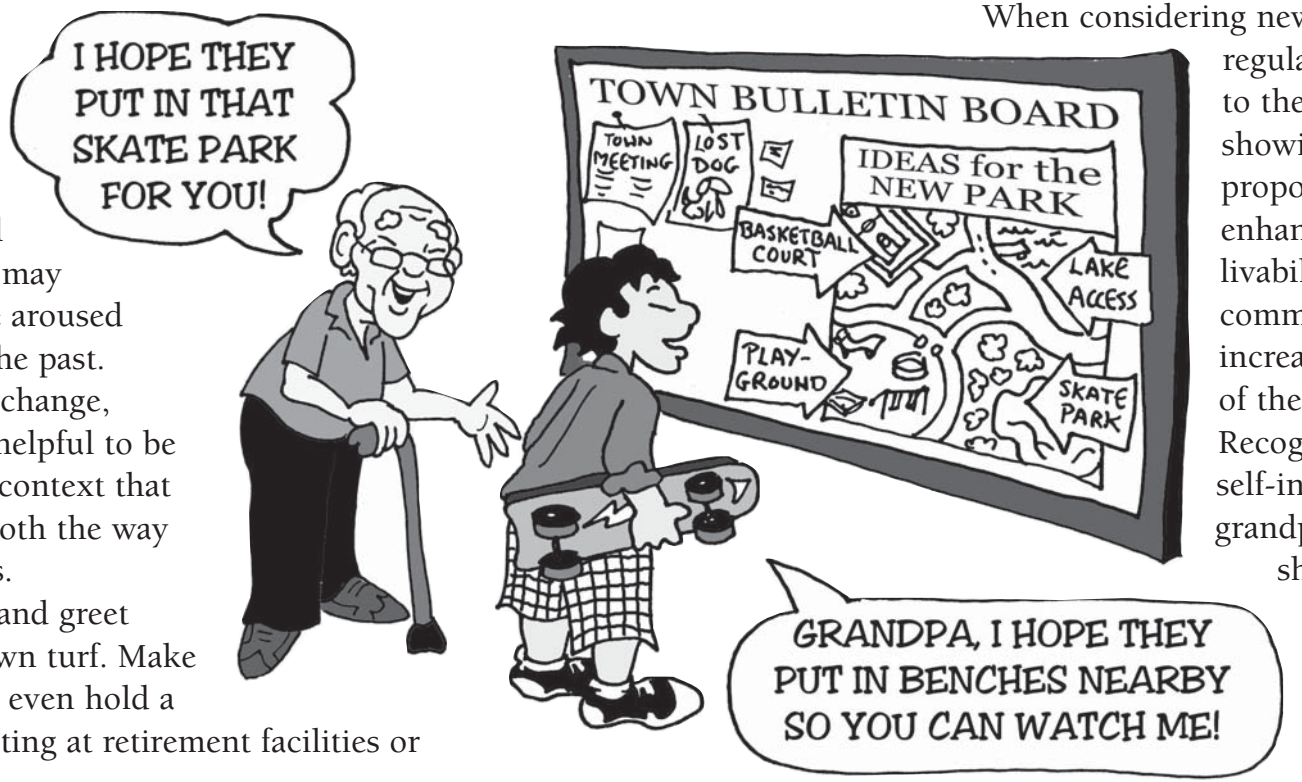
Although there always will be retirees who travel or migrate to other climes, most people are "aging in place," staying in the communities where they have their roots. Reaching and engaging them is both a challenge and an opportunity for your planning board.

First, realize their worth. They have longevity and history, and well remember what may or may not have aroused controversy in the past. Certainly, times change, but it is always helpful to be apprised of any context that would help smooth the way for current ideas.

Second, meet and greet them on their own turf. Make presentations or even hold a community meeting at retirement facilities or senior centers. They usually have ample meeting space and welcome visitors.

Accommodate their few special needs. Schedule some meetings in the daytime. For their easy reading, reproduce handouts or explanatory material in larger than normal print. If you are making a presentation in even a medium-sized room, use a microphone.

When considering new zoning regulations, appeal to their pride by showing how the proposals will enhance the livability of the community and increase the value of their homes. Recognize their self-interest as grandparents by showing how changes will benefit the younger generation.



Most people are 'aging in place,' staying in the communities where they have their roots. Reaching and engaging them is both a challenge and an opportunity for your planning board.

Ask their advice about their priorities and try to accommodate them. For your next workshop or public event, invite young people from a nearby high school to bring their grandparents or older friends. Encourage a dialogue between the generations. For example, when planning a new park, if you consider the needs of older citizens for benches and rest areas, they may be more inclined to support play areas and ball fields.

Older residents also can be valuable members of your planning board. Every commission benefits from having a healthy mix of ages and interests. If yours does not currently include an older citizen, find one who is willing to be involved when you have your next vacancy. If you have a citizens advisory board or special subcommittees, consider retirees for those positions as well.

Show retirees they still count by tapping into their wisdom and availability. Planning in your community will be enriched. ☒

"Retirees can often bring expertise from their previous jobs. In addition, they may no longer have a conflict of interest with projects in the jurisdiction, especially if they are retired from realty, architecture or construction interests.

In Dearborn County, Indiana, retirees have often become county activists. They have researched and improved county road maintenance processes, pushing for widening and striping rural roads for safer nighttime driving. They have worked to improve sanitary sewer accessibility, scrutinized budgets, and enlightened politicians on past practices."

– Christine Mueller, Lawrenceburg, Indiana

"Our aging population can offer valuable advice if we take the time to seek it. Current planning issues include sidewalk design and maintenance, connectivity, streetscape and traffic improvements, mixing work, live and play uses, and a new concept – "visitability," that speaks primarily to helping individuals with mobility concerns to visit friends and family. These are all things that matter to everyone in our communities – whether we're a parent of a child on a tricycle or in a stroller, a teen with a broken leg, or are aging and trying to stay in our homes and neighborhoods.

Attempting to tap into these personal challenges can help a community plan better. For example, a developer with a wheelchair bound parent is more likely to understand the need for wider doors, and think twice about having steps at every exterior exit. At every opportunity, give each age group a reason to be interested in planning."

– Glynis A. Jordan, AICP, Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Planning Is Not Just for Adults

What do kids know about planning? Not much, if you use jargon such as zoning, setbacks, and conditional use. What can they contribute to planning in your community? Plenty! But only if you give them opportunities to express themselves in their own language and in their own way. Terminology familiar to professional and lay planners is sure to turn them off. But talk about putting a large retail store across from their favorite park, whether to build a skateboard facility near the high school, or put speed bumps downtown, and you will get their attention.

With a little care, you also can find rewarding ways to involve young people in the big picture – envisioning the future.

Have a contest, but keep it simple and uncomplicated. Ask children of all ages, "What do you want our community to be like when you grow up?" *Encourage poems, essays, plays and stories, models and posters,* and you will be surprised and delighted at their imaginative and creative responses.

Seek media, business, and other sponsors. Local newspapers and television stations generally cooperate in highlighting good news about young people, and businesses like to have their names linked with such good works. Two high school visionaries in a project I managed wrote a rap song about the future and received front page coverage in the local press. They also were invited to sing at a luncheon of a civic club and on a local radio station. Their peers loved it, though most adults had difficulty understanding the words.

Involve the principals and the teachers in all the schools … public and private, as well as those engaged in home schooling. Make the planning staff and commission members available to speak in classrooms, taking care to put the planning issues you are dealing with in terms of real situations young people face. Inspire the youth and you will inspire their parents.

Make it easy to participate. Have no rules except age limits. Supply

Young people's wisdom and insights not only can add to the quality and fabric of your community, but be a training lesson for future leaders.

sufficient application forms to all schools and community centers and make them available online.

Encourage all to participate. The contributions of grade schoolers will necessarily be less sophisticated than those of middle and high schoolers, but the depth of the ideas of all ages will surprise you. Make special efforts to involve young people in minority communities.

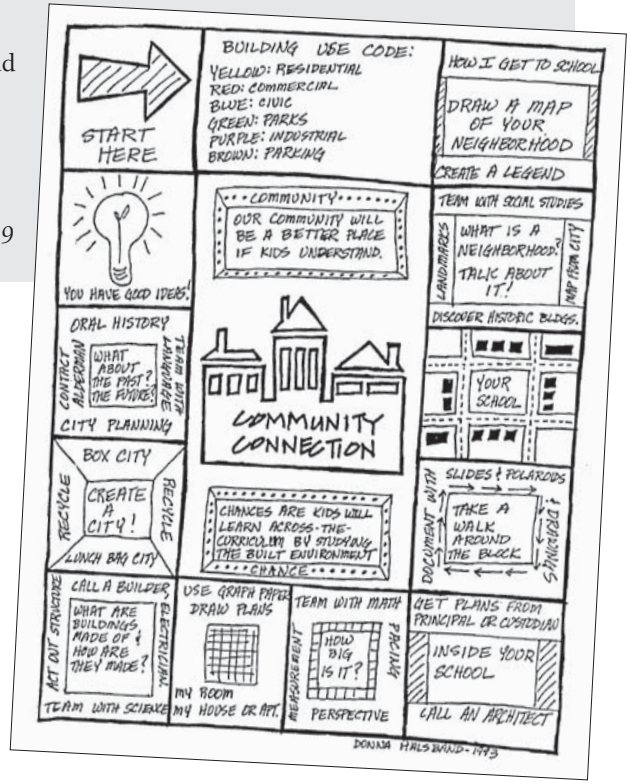
Give all participants recognition. Buttons or caps are as welcome as expensive prizes and can be paid for by business sponsors. The best recognition is to display the results prominently where people congregate. The local library, city hall, shopping mall … each community has its own center of activity. Announce they will be shown at your next community meeting and you will attract a cadre of parents and grandparents who go wherever their children's creations are posted.

Most importantly, after the young people have had their say, make sure their comments are considered when the planning decisions are made. Given opportunities to express themselves in their own special ways, young people's wisdom and insights not only can add to the quality and fabric of your community, but be a training lesson for future leaders. ☒

The Enthusiasm of Children

"The enthusiasm of children whose voices are heard in the planning process is striking. When children are shown how to express their ideas, and see their ideas respected and included in the process their attitude of angry alienation changes to a strong desire to participate and an urge to show other children how to participate."

From Stanley King's "Fresh Eyes," in PCJ #19



Graphic from Center for the Built Environment: <www.cubekc.org>.

Be a Partner With Your Schools

In too many communities, planning stops at the school door. At the same time that boards of education are dealing with the challenges of overcrowded schools in one area and others that are under-utilized, planners are choosing housing policies that affect the demographics of these same schools. This behavior is encouraged when their governing bodies and sources of revenue are separate.

While such divisions of responsibility may have made sense in the past, this is less defensible in today's era of growing needs, finite resources, and a demanding citizenry. Enlightened planning commissioners should take the responsibility of bridging that divide without dividing the community.

Has your planning board ever met formally or informally with the school board? Do your planners work with school staff on issues that concern you both? Do you have early notice of plans for new schools or playgrounds? Do you inform them of prospective zoning changes that affect the schools? If school officials need a zoning or comprehensive plan change, do they involve you in the pre-proposal stage? What community needs could be satisfied by joint planning?

Consider transportation. What can you do to help make schools easier to reach by foot or bike? Will the next new school be built in an area that is accessible for children walking or bicycling? Can school parking lots be used by neighborhood businesses when schools are closed?

Consider sharing. Few communities have enough libraries, parks, and places for community meetings and cultural events. Schools have many of these, often closed to the general public. Joint planning and/or co-ownership can benefit all.

Your planning board is the ideal body to initiate dialogue with school officials. Show them your plans in process and invite their comments. Ask them about their short and long-range facility and property needs. Talk about common issues and concerns and how they can be solved in a cooperative, cost-effective fashion. After laying the groundwork, agree on a project on which you can act jointly and direct your staffs to do everything possible to make it a success.

The most effective planning boards continually demonstrate their understanding that the community is served best if its individual components work as an interdependent whole rather than a series of unrelated parts. By becoming partners with the schools you will demonstrate your commitment to serving the community, not enhancing your individual fiefdoms. All will benefit. ☒

Schools & Communities

"School size, design, and siting are not just of interest to folks focused on education, nor should they be. Citizens and groups concerned about land use planning, community development, historic preservation, and public health, are also focusing on how to make better education investment decisions.

Cities are combining school revitalization funding with other municipal investments, using schools as a key component in efforts to stabilize entire neighborhoods. … Suburban areas are also taking steps to have neighborhood schools help 'center' the community.

Where and how school investments are made have major consequences for the community. Planning commissioners can contribute substantially to school planning efforts and to the quality of life in their communities by bringing their insights and perspective to the table."

From Tim Torma's "Back to School for Planners," in PCJ #56

Tomorrow's School

"Tomorrow's school will be a school without walls – a school that's built of doors which open to the entire community. … Tomorrow's school will be the center of community life, for the grownups as well as the children: 'a shopping center of human services.' It might have a community health clinic, a public library, a theater, and recreation facilities. It will provide formal education for all citizens – and it will not close its doors anymore at 3 o'clock. It will employ its buildings round the clock and its teachers round the year. I am not describing a distant Utopia, but I am describing the kind of education which must be the great and the urgent work of our time."

Remarks of President Lyndon B. Johnson to the American Association of School Administrators, Feb. 16, 1966.

Improving Your Commission's Effectiveness

"Strive to be open and cordial in all your relationships. Your community deserves no less."

Improving Your Commission's Effectiveness

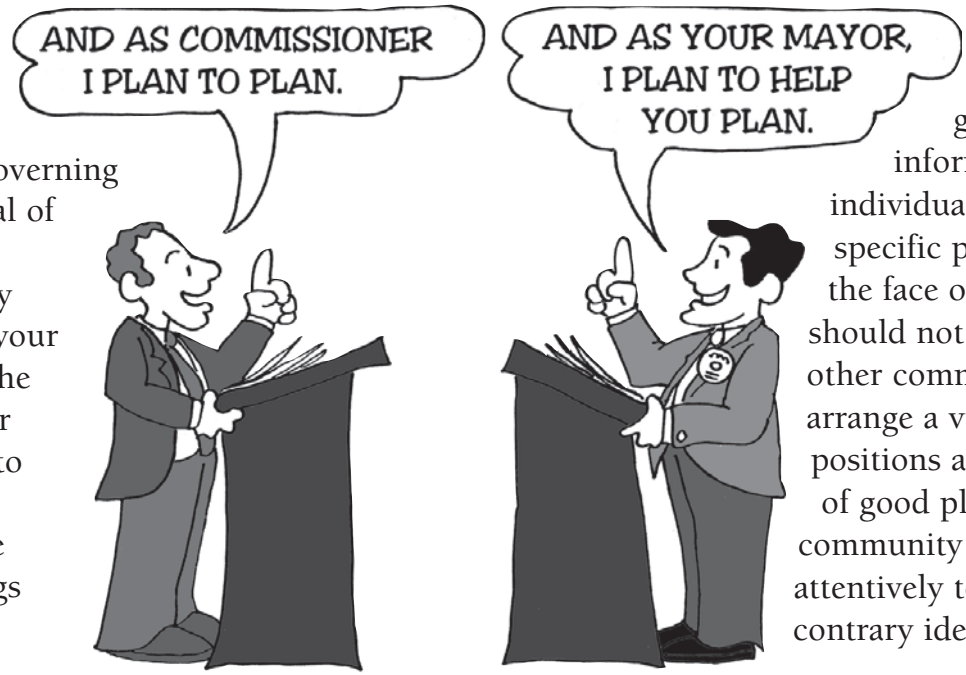
How to Work Effectively With Elected Officials

When was the last time the planning board spent weeks or months on an important issue, only to have your decision overturned by your elected city council or commission?

If this happens often, you should ask yourselves what steps you can take to make sure this is a rarity and that planning commission policies and decisions usually are supported by your elected body. It may be very interesting to sit in on your governing body's meeting when an appeal of one of your decisions is being considered. You may not enjoy hearing people disagree with your well-reasoned approach, but the experience should reveal other points of view you may need to consider in the future.

If the content or form of the planning commission's findings often are set aside or ignored, you may be able to find simple changes that will make them more acceptable; if the findings are okay but the governing body disagrees with your conclusions, revisit the issue with one or more officials or staff to find out why you are out of step. This knowledge may help you craft a winning strategy the next time.

Be acquainted with the political platforms of the members of the governing body. Did someone campaign for office and win by promising to end all planning in your community? Are some members strongly pro or anti-growth? That type of information is a clue to how individuals may respond to specific planning issues. Even in the face of tacit opposition, you should not give up. You and the other commissioners should arrange a visit to explain your positions and the positive results of good planning on your community – and also listen attentively to the elected official's contrary ideas.



While planning boards should not expect their decisions to be rubber-stamped, neither should they be regularly overturned.

In such relationships, do not ask planning department staff to carry your message. It is most effectively conveyed, and received, if you do it yourselves. Politely but firmly insist that you speak to the appropriate elected official, not to staff.

Another relationship-building activity is to invite elected officials to a retreat or informal workshop where you try to reach consensus on a common vision, goals, objectives, and planning agenda. Even if the best you can do is agree to disagree, you will have heard each other and begun to form relationships that will be useful in the future.

Most importantly, strive to be open and cordial in all your relationships. Your community deserves no less. ☒

The "P" Word

"Whether or not you accept the title, 'politician,' as a member of the planning board, you are certainly an important actor in the political processes of your community."

From Elaine Cogan's "It's Time to Discuss the "P" Word," in PCJ #16

More Engagement Strategies

"Although not mandated by code, most planning commissions would do themselves a huge favor if they invested the time to engage their local officials in planning. There are a variety of strategies a commission can use to enhance its working relationship with the governing body. Some of the more successful approaches include:

• Planning Commission Annual Report. A report documenting planning commission activities, and providing an overview of local planning issues and challenges, should be prepared annually and shared with the governing body. In some localities the report also contains the commission's work plan for the coming year. If possible, have the report hand delivered by the commission chair at a regular meeting of the governing body, perhaps with a short accompanying oral presentation.

• Joint Work Sessions. It makes sense for the planning commission and the local governing body to meet at least once a year to discuss matters involving planning, land use, and community change management issues. A working dinner is a common approach. To avoid being haphazard and disjointed, an agenda should be developed and followed.

• Joint Visioning Exercise. Another useful engagement strategy, especially if your locality is preparing or updating its comprehensive plan, is a joint visioning exercise. By including the governing body in the actual planning process, especially at an early stage, the commission can incorporate the governing body's perspective and concerns. This will reduce the chances of being 'blind-sided' by critical comments at the end of the process."

From Michael Chandler's "Linking Elected Officials with Planning," in PCJ #48

Positive Media Relations Need Special Effort

As a public official, never consider the media friends who will do favors that are not in their self-interest. They have no obligation to provide free coverage for your agency. Most media are businesses whose owners expect to make a profit. Even the public or nonprofit media pick and choose the subjects they believe interest their audiences. With these caveats, the media serve as important conduits to your constituencies, and you can work together by recognizing their similarities as well as important differences.

Print – your daily or weekly newspaper – can cover stories in more depth than the other media. Know their deadlines and give them as much notice as possible. If the reporter cannot stay for an entire meeting, arrange to phone her or the editor as soon as the meeting is over and/or the decision is made. You might ask them to delay the report of the meeting so that the complete story can be written the next day, but they probably will not agree for fear of being scooped by the other media.

Television cameras can be obtrusive especially when doing close-ups, but news crews can be asked politely to film from an angle that does not obstruct the public's view. Offer to brief the assigned print or television reporter before the meeting and give them a written outline of the issues under discussion. Whenever you are interviewed for TV, talk in short, succinct sentences and be prepared for a very brief segment to appear on the broadcast, regardless of the amount of time they filmed.

Radio listeners are most likely doing something else while listening. To communicate well over this medium, speak clearly in a friendly, informal voice. Local call-in talk shows are a good vehicle for two-way communication with the public though a clever host will try to boost listenership and ratings by challenging you with controversial ideas or statements. Be prepared by ascertaining the format and style before you go on air.

There will be times when no matter how hard you have tried, a misleading or

damaging story will appear in print or be broadcast. Do not be swayed by your first frustrated or angry emotions. If other colleagues, staff, or friends do not think any harm was done, ignore it.

However, if you and others believe you have cause to complain, assess the situation. Was the entire treatment of the issue untrue? Or were the facts correct, but the emphasis skewed? Were comments misquoted? Does the story unfairly damage your reputation or that of the commission? If any or all of the above is true, contact the reporter first and, only if necessary, the editor or station manager. If you discuss the issue without rancor, they may be receptive to printing a retraction, guest editorial or letter, or giving you rebuttal time on the air.

Above all, do not burn any bridges with the media. Over time, and with effort, you can build and nurture relationships that benefit all. ☒

Communities on Camera

"'They put faces on issues,' says Larry Nielsen, city manager of Bangor, Michigan in explaining why community videos can be so effective. Nielsen describes how making a community video helped involve many residents in the local planning process as the city began developing a new five-year plan. As Nielsen observes, 'many people are more comfortable speaking to a video camera than at a public meeting.'

The Orton Family Foundation initiated the community video concept in 1998. Working with the American Planning Association, it has published a manual *Lights, Camera, Community Video* (available from APA's Planners Book Service). As Helen Whyte, Senior Project Director with Orton explains, 'producing a video provides a way to engage citizens in planning and develop a citizen-inspired set of priorities.' Videos, adds Whyte, need not be costly and assistance (and equipment) is often available from community access TV stations or area colleges. Most importantly, by involving the whole community, producing the video can energize the planning process."

From "Communities on Camera," in PCJ #61

Video Agendas

"During the years I worked as a planner in Burlington, Vermont, we filmed a 'video agenda' of projects scheduled for the upcoming planning commission meeting. The video was broadcast on the local access television station. When filming, I went out to the sites and explained what was being proposed – literally walking the viewer through what was being asked of the planning commission. We also augmented this with procedural information on how the project was being reviewed, under what criteria, those sorts of things.

The video agenda typically lasted about 20 minutes per show, and was broadcast leading up to the meetings, and then re-televised afterwards. People loved these broadcasts and felt they were really getting pertinent information."

From Glynis Jordan in "Roundtable Discussion: Challenges We Face," in PCJ #57

Dealing With Difficult People Requires Finesse

Planning issues can bring out the best and the worst in citizens. Your decisions affect the everyday lives of many people – the quality of their neighborhoods and the value of their homes and businesses. At some point in your commission career, you will chair or sponsor a public meeting where people are polarized, opinionated, and possibly rude and abusive. It may not be easy in these difficult circumstances, but it is essential that you keep your temper under control and your opinions to yourself.

Here are descriptions of some of the most common disrupters and suggestions about how to deal with them.

Arguers. Never answer an accusation with an angry retort nor ask a question that encourages people to continue their tirade. Remember that it takes two to argue; a reasoned and fair-handed response may not convince the arguers, but may sway others to your side.

Attackers. Attackers are probably making you or the commission the scapegoat for a more generalized anger against the "system" or other matters you cannot control. They usually speak hurriedly and in loud voices. Put them off guard and slow down the momentum by answering deliberately and with assurance. If the attacker is a public official who seems to enjoy verbally abusing staff or volunteer commissioners, try to stay out of his way until he calms down. He will.

Gossip-spreaders. They speak in authoritative voices and will not be deterred by correct information. A simple, "Why, where did you hear that?" or "Does anyone know where we can get more information?" will often shame them, until the next time.

Hair-splitters. Sometimes their "picky" points are important to consider and perhaps a clue that you have neglected something. Do not take it up during the meeting. Refer the hair-splitters to a staff expert or

someone who can do research and help resolve the issue with the correct facts.

Old-timers. They may be garrulous, but they also are the keepers of valuable community memory. Appoint them to a subcommittee where their recollections can be put to good use.

Single-issuers. Every community has them. No matter the topic at hand, they are ready at every occasion to bring up the same issue. You may be talking about housing densities and they rant and rave about the sewers. You may be discussing park development and still they rail about sewers, and so on. After awhile, you will recognize them and probably can repeat what they have to say before they do. Listen and nod politely, but do not ask them any questions or encourage them in any way … unless, of course, by some chance, you are talking about their favorite subject.

Yakkers. Strictly set and enforce time limits on all individual comments and use a bell or other audible means to keep yakkers in line. You may have to cut them off by calling on the next speaker, but it is important that everyone follow the same rules. The essence of democracy is to give equal time to many people with disparate points of view.

Deal with each situation with goodwill, fairness, and a sense of humor. Call a recess if warring factions are out of control. Most importantly, realize that the tone and tenor of the meeting is often influenced by your own behavior. ☒

Skills You Will Need

"No matter how well you prepare intellectually for your role as commissioner, there is one simple fact you will learn and never forget: most people do not like change.

Be strong! Although knowledge, experience, and willingness to learn are important skills for a commissioner to have, they are less important than the personal skills you will need to rely on during all but the most perfunctory of meetings:

- *patience* to listen calmly to drawn out, repetitive, and angry comments by concerned citizens.
- *self-confidence* to speak out and ask those hard questions that need to be asked.
- *willingness* to ask for guidance from the staff planning officials and legal counsel.
- *objectivity,* in order to separate objectionable personalities from their otherwise reasonable claims.
- *courage* to make wise decisions for the betterment of your entire community.

And one last thought … don't lose your sense of humor, for it may be your best ally for getting through a difficult evening."

From "Welcome to the Commission! Advice from Six Planning Commissioners," in PCJ # 39. This excerpt comes from Ann R. McReynolds, of Webster Groves, Missouri.

On Being An Effective Commission Chair*

The critically important role of the chair of a planning board cannot be overemphasized. The planning process suffers if the chair is either weak and unfocused or too strong and intimidating.

These are some principles of effective leadership planning commission chairs should follow.

Be conversant with all the issues under discussion, but do not feel the need to be an expert on any. In fact, knowing too many technicalities may get in the way of encouraging and accepting the opinions of laypeople, a key role you should play.

Always show fairness and do not express your personal opinions, except when it is time to vote. If you must speak out, turn over the gavel to your vice chair. However, exercise that prerogative sparingly. If you do it too often, your ability to be an unbiased presiding officer will be questioned. Fairness also means you give everyone a chance to speak and deal quickly and decisively with those – either commission members or the public – who try to dominate the discussion.

Disdain the trappings of power. The gavel is all you should need to keep order, but it should seldom be used. Neither request, require, nor countenance special consideration from staff or from anyone else.

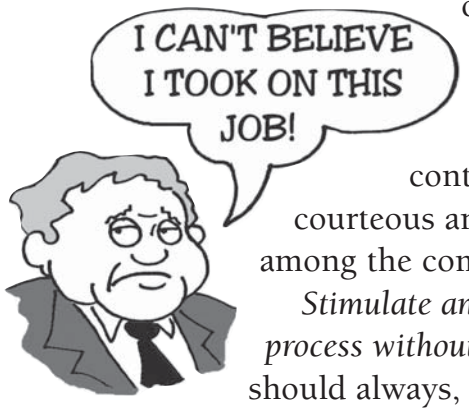
Display energy and enthusiasm, even at a hearing that has dragged on into the early morning hours.

THE NOT-SO-EFFECTIVE COMMISSION CHAIR.

Most of us know good leadership when we see it, though we may not be able to define its exact qualities. One easy clue is attendance. If the commission has an effective chair, members will not be absent very often because too many productive and important decisions will be made without them.

Of course, an effective chair will not have allowed the meeting to go on that long, but in any event, you must always strive to be alert and positive, fair and courteous.

Use praise unsparingly. A good leader does not need praise; a good leader dispenses it when merited, but always sincerely. There should be much to laud: staff work on a particularly difficult or onerous issue; public testimony that is fair and non-belligerent on a contentious subject; and courteous and intelligent discussion among the commissioners.



Stimulate and synthesize the group process without overwhelming it. You should always, figuratively at least, be looking to the right and the left and keeping your antennae out for verbal and nonverbal signals from the commission, staff, and the public. You do the best job as chair if you move the group to consensus more often than to a win/lose posture.

Most of all, a good planning commission chair enjoys the role and looks forward to tomorrow as another opportunity to exert enlightened and informed leadership. ☒

Who Should Chair?

"Don't select chairmen on a seniority basis alone and don't pass the office along from member to member as a reward and honor. The nicest guy in the world, the hardest working, the most interested, and your most valuable member can be indescribably horrible in the Chair. This is just one of those facts of life which is hard to explain, but, unfortunately, all too true. As occasion presents itself, give prospective chairmen a chance to preside, head up a sub-committee, report on special projects, and otherwise prepare themselves and demonstrate their abilities and leadership under pressure."

From "The Riggins Rules," in PCJ #13

*About the designation "chair" rather than chairman, chairwoman, or chairperson; all are in common use, and all are correct. However, the neutral term "chair" is more in keeping with similar terms for other leadership positions such as administrator, president, and chief executive officer.

Commission Members Also Can Be Leaders

In the previous Tip, I wrote about leadership and the importance of strong chairs. Their keen facilitation skills are vital to the success of each planning board meeting, and to the planning process itself.

But there is only one chair – there are many members – and most of us probably never will be (or even aspire to be) in that role. Moreover, even the best chair cannot do it alone. Everyone is important to the success and smooth functioning of the planning board. Members do themselves and their community a disservice if they just sit back, speak only when spoken to, or are otherwise passive.

In many ways, the roles of planning board members are more subtle and not as easily defined as that of the chair. You do not have the title nor, for that matter, the gavel to give you authority. However, if you are willing to be thoughtful and reasoned participants, you will make important contributions to the proceedings. How, then, can planning board members be most effective?

Prepare yourself. Read all the pertinent written material, beforehand, review anything you do not understand with the planning director, and be ready with constructive questions or comments at the meeting.

Arrive on time so you can get your papers and thoughts in order.

Participate actively. Listen carefully to the presentations and comments of others and join in with remarks of substance that advance the discussion.

Help out the chair but don't take over. You need

Everyone is important to the smooth functioning of the planning board; members do themselves and their community a disservice if they just sit back, speak when spoken to, or are otherwise passive observers.

not suffer silently if a weak or indecisive chair impedes discussion or the ability of the board to make decisions. There are several actions you can take that do not usurp the chair's authority but help keep things moving. Remind everyone of the time constraints ("according to our agenda, we have just five more minutes before the next item"), or sum up what has been said, followed by a recommendation or a motion. Finally, at the first opportunity, choose a more capable chair.

Be an expert – but not a know-it-all. Effective commissioners wisely take time to become more informed than the other members on a select number of subjects. However, even then, do not assume you know everything. Be open, and willing to consider the opinions of others. If you have to disagree with staff, commission members, or the public, be sure you have the correct information.

Watch your body language. Bored by the proceedings? Angry at the chair for cutting you off? Upset with the public for haranguing the commission unfairly? Resorting to facial expressions that show displeasure, drumming your fingers on the table, crossing your arms – all are strong signals you should avoid.

Above all enjoy yourself and show it with humor and goodwill. As a planning commissioner, you are performing a task very important to the well-being of your community. The occasional slings and arrows should be worth your

Personal Relationships

"No commission or board can be effective or taken seriously if its members are constantly bickering. At all public meetings, you should respect each other regardless of your differences. If you absolutely cannot get along, you should seriously consider seeking intervention by a neutral, third party or asking for resignations from the warring parties."

From Elaine Cogan's "How Effective is Your Planning Board?," in PCJ #55

Developing a "Farm Team"

"Just as major league ball clubs develop future prospects through their 'farm teams,' your planning commission might want to consider ways of educating planning commissioners of tomorrow in the ways of planning. One approach is to hold workshops, perhaps annually, on planning and zoning basics open to all members of the community. This can have the fringe benefit of generating a constituency of community members who understand the benefits sound planning can bring to the community – and will support local planning efforts."

From Mike Chandler's "Citizen Planning Academies," in PCJ #29

Control the Meeting by Controlling the Agenda

Is this a description of your typical planning commission meeting? You start ten or more minutes late; go through the items prepared by staff; they are in no priority order, with the most important ones taken up several hours later; leave the public comment to the end when most everyone is tired and grumpy; and adjourn much later than anyone wants, with some important business held over to next time when you follow the same bad habits. There are many ways to rein in runaway meetings. A good place to start is with the agenda.

Consider the items in order of their importance, not in the tiresome and nonproductive usual sequence of "minutes, old business, new business." It makes better sense to tackle items that require your full attention when you are all at your freshest, and that is usually at the beginning of the meeting.

Allow ample and early time for issues that most concern the public. Too often, planners still put them last or next to last on the agenda even though they are well aware that these are just the matters certain to attract a large, opinionated crowd. It should be no surprise when people get restless and angry if they have to sit through several hours of deliberations that do not concern them. Put the contentious or controversial issues on the agenda early, and give them the time they deserve. Do not be offended if most of the crowd leaves as soon as you turn to other matters.

Place together routine items that require little or no discussion and consider them in a group. Some bodies call this the "consent agenda" and require one motion and one vote to approve them all.

Put the contentious or controversial issues on the agenda early, and give them the time they deserve. Do not be offended if most of the crowd leaves as soon as you turn to other matters.

But be careful that they are, indeed, routine items and not anything controversial you can be accused of "sneaking through."

Do everything possible to help the public follow along with what may appear to be technical or difficult procedures. Print sufficient agendas for all to pick up as they arrive. Also, make sure there are sufficient copies of any graphics or explanatory material. Provide another handout with a simple explanation of the board's processes … What general rules of procedure do you follow? What is the purpose of a first reading? Second? On what issues do you require simple majorities and/or unanimous votes? What is your appeals process? What are the names of all the planning commissioners? Contact information about key staff?

All planning boards and commissions have some form of agenda. Examine yours closely to see if it is the best you can have as a way of contributing to orderly and productive meetings. ☒

Organize for Business

- Set aside time on your agenda for dealing with vital, if not necessarily urgent, planning concerns.
- Distribute the agenda and background materials well in advance of the meeting.
- Have sufficient copies of these materials for the public.
- Start and end on time.
- Allow ample and early time for issues on which the public wants to participate.
- Be polite to each other and the public at all times.
- Discuss only one issue at a time.
- Know the rules of order but use them wisely.

From Elaine Cogan's "Meeting Formats Should Follow their Functions," in PCJ #35

First Impressions Matter

"Do create a good impression of city government. Remember that this is the first important contact that many of the people in the audience have had with the administration of their city and for some this is the most important matter in which they have ever been involved. Many will never be back again and many will never have another such contact and experience. Your performance will create in their minds the picture which they will always carry with them of 'the way the city is run.' Make it as pleasant and comforting a picture as possible."

From "The Riggins Rules," in PCJ #13

Voting Is Not Always Necessary

How often does the planning board engage in an informal but productive discussion when a member interrupts by making a motion? Most likely, someone will offer a second, and you soon can be down a formal path, following rules of order you may not have needed at all. A motion made prematurely or in the middle of a free and open conversation can stifle the very debate you need. Know when to cut off discussion, when to call for a vote, and when you can reach a decision by consensus or general agreement. The goal should be to give everyone the fullest opportunity to contribute to the smooth running and decision-making process of your planning board.

First, it is important to acknowledge that most, if not all, decisions on legal matters require a recorded vote. Many other issues, however, are best resolved by reaching consensus. Voting yea or nay can polarize board members by creating a winner/loser environment. While striving for consensus may be a longer and time-consuming process, it also encourages the group to come to general agreement without forcing individuals to take sides.

The consensus-builder is often not the chair. The role can be played by anyone who has the patience, aptitude, and interest. She relies on her ability to listen carefully to what people say or mean when they may appear to be rambling, and also on interpreting non-verbal behavior or body language. If you aspire to be the consensus-builder, you probably have to listen more than you participate in the discussion, all the while

watching participants' actions. Be alert for a momentary lull in the discussion, when it seems that all the points have been raised and the conversation is becoming repetitive. Head off a formal motion by using summary language such as "Now that it appears we have discussed all the options, it seems we generally agree on …" or "It is pretty clear that we want to …" or "We seem to have consensus on … ." Most times, members will nod in agreement and be relieved that someone is so perceptive. Thus, you can move on to another topic with impunity. If you have misread the situation, board members will most certainly tell you and the conversation can continue.

A consensus does not necessarily imply agreement. It can be reached when you are at an impasse and have exhausted the points to talk about. In this situation, the consensus builder can say, "It seems we will have to agree to disagree at this time; why don't we move on?"

Though most people find a consensus format very comfortable and preferable to constant voting, it may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable to some board members. Obviously, it can be used only if there is consensus to do so. Voting is a clear and direct method of reaching a decision. The consensus model is more intuitive and collaborative. Each has a proper place in the decision-making process of a well-functioning planning board. ☒

Know when to cut off discussion, when to call for a vote and when you can reach a decision by consensus or general agreement.

On Building Consensus

"Consensus comes easier on non-controversial items. While this may seem blatantly obvious, you would be amazed (or maybe not) how much time is spent talking in circles on agenda items that will be passed unanimously. The chair needs to bring any circular discussions to an end. The best way I have seen this done is by calling for a motion."

– Dale R. Powers, Senior Planner, Kendall County, Illinois, and Chair, APA Small Town & Rural Planning Division.

"Regardless of the circumstances our Chairman will go out of his way to assure that whoever wants to be heard receives their opportunity. We seem to reach consensus, at least to a great degree, in near all of our deliberations without a specific 'consensus builder.' … Any of our members will take the lead as they deem necessary."

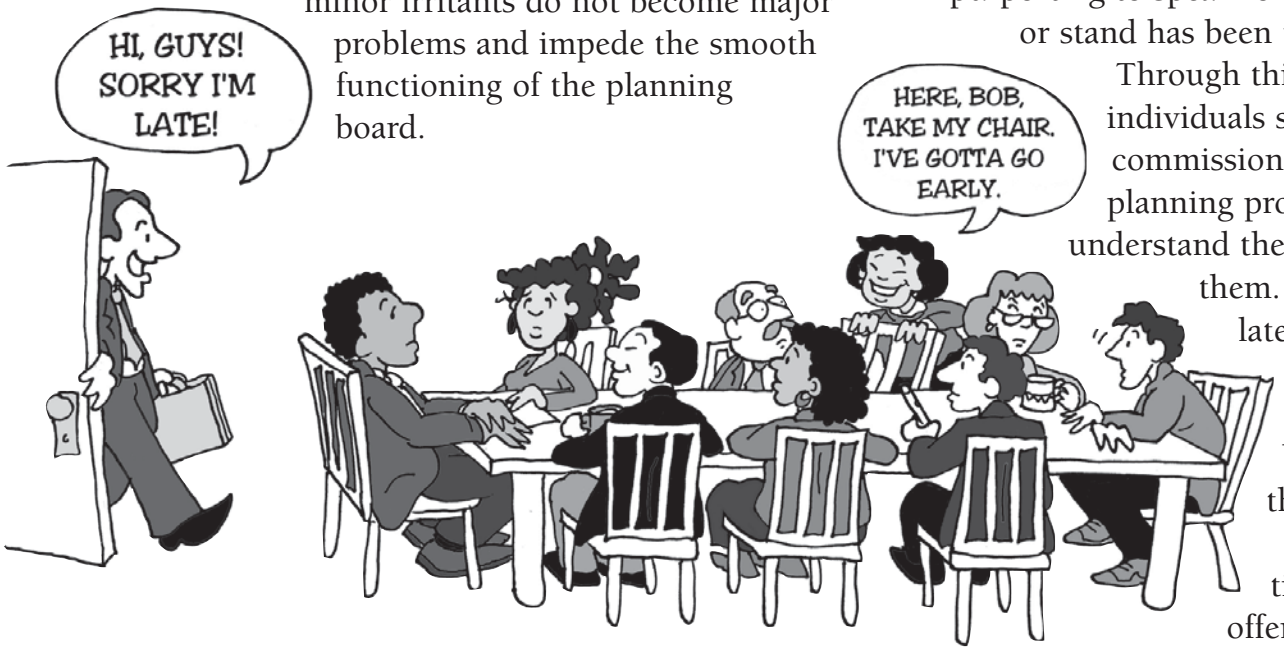
– Bob Steiskal, Jr., Member, Gulf Shores (Alabama) Planning Commission

"My conviction about the value of consensus building couldn't be stronger. Democracy is, at its heart, dependent upon good citizens with fair minds who can work their way through all of the information and arguments and come to an agreement about their decision."

– Lois Merrill, Dodgeville, Wisconsin

Minor Irritants Can Become Major Problems

Members of planning boards and commissions should be chosen for their particular talents or backgrounds rather than their compatibility or congeniality. Still, it is important that you all work together, even though you may disagree on issues of substance. It may take concerted efforts to ensure that minor irritants do not become major problems and impede the smooth functioning of the planning board.



Members themselves may, sometimes unwittingly, trigger the problems by:

- regularly arriving late.
- holding side conversations during the meeting.
- talking to each other and/or the public in rude or patronizing tones.
- expounding on every issue with a long-winded tirade.
- demanding excessive amounts of information before rendering an opinion.
- purporting to speak for the board when no official vote or stand has been taken.

Through this and similar behavior, individuals show disrespect for the other commissioners, the public, and for the planning process itself. Possibly, they may not understand the norms of behavior expected of them. More likely, by being chronically late arrivers – or chatting or disrupting the meeting – they send the message that their business is more important than the board's.

Always start your meetings on time and all but the worst offenders will soon mend their ways

"As a professional planning director and citizen planner, I have witnessed all of the behaviors mentioned. However, I have come to expect the unexpected in the planning forum, as the meetings are unrehearsed, the players are lay people, and the issues are often political and controversial.

Sun Tzu's 'The Art of War' should be required reading for all people involved with community planning."

– Frank Wash, Walker, Michigan

when they realize they miss important information or discussion if they arrive late.

Those who speak out of turn, are rude or condescending, or incorrectly speak on behalf of the commission, send the message that they need the limelight, no matter how much trouble it may cause. Be willing to interrupt them politely but firmly so that the public realizes they do not represent the rest of you.

It is important that each new set of commission officers make it clear to the media and to the public that the chair (or sometimes vice chair) is the designated spokesperson. Even that individual should not speak for the commission until you have taken official action.

How do you deal with commissioners who have tedious opinions on every subject or who ask for additional information incessantly? If the chair is not taking charge firmly, members have to take the initiative. After a reasonable time enduring this monologue or endless questioning, look at your watch and say you think you have heard enough to move on, asking for the agreement of the others. Paraphrase what has been said already, or ask the recorder to read the record. Then, be willing to suggest that the board take action, if only to defer the matter to a later time. The individual who caused the problem may complain or even abstain, but if you have the majority on your side, you can move on.

While it is important to have rules of conduct, they should not be so onerous nor rigid that they stifle discussion or so lax that they permit unbridled misbehavior. Be reasonable and fair, but willing to discipline members who consistently impede the work you are expected to accomplish. Sometimes, the chair or another volunteer must take the responsibility to talk frankly with the troublemaker "off line."

Commission business is jeopardized when board members consistently put themselves and their whims above those of the public or their fellow commissioners. Difficult situations can be assuaged if the board has generally agreed on standards of conduct beforehand, and if members are willing to stand firm and united when they are abused. ☒

"Restraint and PATIENCE *will serve you well in many situations that confront the planning board."*

"An effective planning commissioner realizes that PASSION *can be a valuable tool."*

"There may be times when you have come to a principled conclusion that is neither popular nor supported by a majority of the board. If your colleagues respect you, they will respect your PERSISTENCE*."*

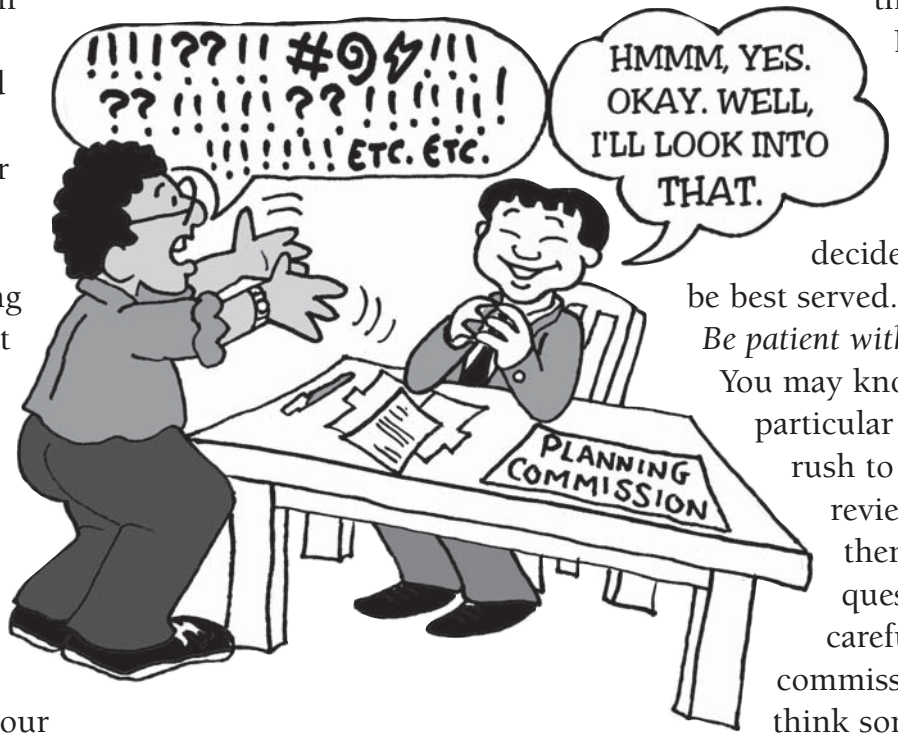
The 3 P's of Being a Commissioner

The 3 P's of Being a Commissioner

Patience Has Its Rewards

Restraint and patience serve you well in many situations that confront the planning board. Here is one example.

You and the other commissioners have endured three hours worth of testimony from citizens. It is late in the evening and the arguments on both sides have become repetitious. You haven't heard anything "new" in awhile. Some people are emotional or speaking in accented English or less than perfect grammar. Still, as the meeting or hearing continues, it is important that you show the same patience with the last presenter as you did with the first. Of course, rude or disruptive behavior should never be tolerated, but neither should legitimate citizen expression be curbed. Avoid any clues that may indicate your impatience, such as tapping your pencil on the desk, whispering to your neighbor, interrupting, or answering abruptly.



Be forbearing with applicants. You see all kinds before the planning board: from savvy developers who appear to know the zoning code better than you do, to inexperienced newcomers who are understandably baffled by all the rules and regulations. Put aside your biases and preconceptions. All applicants deserve your respect and patience as you consider their requests and decide how your community can be best served.

Be patient with the other commissioners. You may know more than some about a particular subject and be inclined to rush to judgment after a cursory review of the situation, expecting them to take your advice without question. It is important to listen carefully to all your fellow commissioners, as ill informed as you think some may be. Even if you hear

All applicants deserve your respect and patience as you consider their requests and decide how your community can be best served.

nothing you did not know and your opinion does not change, everyone is entitled to participate in the process. Similarly, they may be more willing to be patient with you when you have to ask questions or carry on a discussion.

Show patience with your staff, especially in public. Ask questions for clarification, but not in an accusatory or demeaning manner. If you are dissatisfied with the contents of a report or its conclusions, wait until a less public opportunity. You can always ask to hold over a hearing if you need more information, but save your disagreements for private time when you are not embarrassing the people who work for you.

Have patience with the planning process. Yes, the procedures you have to follow may at times seem arduous and even unnecessary. Though in many cases they are there to protect your community from frivolous or precipitous action, they should not be sacrosanct and impervious to change. If the planning or approval processes can be improved to the benefit of the community, find ways to influence positive change. In the meantime, live with them, and each other, patiently. ☒

When You Become an "Insider"

"It will not take long after you have joined the planning board to become an 'insider.' You will begin to understand professional planning jargon and may even be able to decipher plat maps and legal documents.

That knowledge, which is essential to doing a good job on the commission, can also cause you to be impatient with lesser informed citizens who slow down commission meetings with simple or elementary questions. If you are not careful, impatience can become paranoia and you can consider people who ask questions or demand answers as the 'enemy.'

Patience may be the first attribute you lose … when it should be the one you hold on to most tenaciously. Train yourself to be patient with the process and with all the participants, and you will go a long way toward increasing your effectiveness."

From Elaine Cogan's "Starting Out the New Year on the Right Foot," in PCJ #8

Listen To Everyone

"Listen to all the people and not just those who fit into a neat stereotype of 'desirable citizen.' Worst traits often come out at a public zoning or planning hearing. But angry, obstreperous, or noisy people are not necessarily wrong."

From Elaine Cogan's "It's Time to Discuss the 'P' Word," in PCJ #16

Making the Case for Passion

Much planning is dispassionate. Citizens fill out the proper forms, pay the fees, meet the regulations, and receive approval from the planning staff or board. In our zeal to be objective and fair, it is easy to dismiss passion as an undesirable trait for planners and a suspect emotion for citizens.

To the contrary, passion is a powerful and admirable quality if it is not expressed in a hysterical or zealous, take-no-prisoners mode. It can be a positive model when you as a commissioner show a calm but passionate advocacy for the value of planning as a vital contribution to your community's present and future livability – and when you recognize that citizens can also be rightfully passionate about their neighborhoods, the natural environment, schools, playing fields, or other matters of concern.

Empathizing with the passions of others may help inspire you and your fellow commissioners to deal constructively with controversy and find reasonable compromises.

Sometimes passion can cause you to be a loner. You may have patiently listened to all the arguments on a contentious issue, weighed the information, debated openly and fairly with your colleagues, and still reached a conclusion that is not supported by the majority on the planning board. This may not be a comfortable position and would be ineffective if you are too often on the losing side. However, if you can express that passionate disagreement with conviction while not disparaging those who have other points of view, you will engender respect, and may even win over others.

An effective planning board member realizes that passion can be a valuable tool in advancing the cause of planning in their community. ☒

No Apologies Needed

"Sometimes developers or citizens may make you feel uncomfortable for even being in a position to render a decision. Don't fall into that trap! Acting properly, planning and zoning commissions perform a valuable service to the community as a whole. Since most communities make substantial investments in plans, parks, roads, sewer systems, and so on, they have every right to exert reasonable control, through planning and zoning, over how private development affects the community's built environment and whether development conforms to the adopted master plan and ordinances. Don't apologize for being a planning commissioner."

From Steve Burt's "Being a Planning Commissioner," in PCJ #25

Pride & Satisfaction

"When I was first appointed to the city planning commission, I was told by a former commissioner that I was going to 'have a lot of fun' in my new position. I was totally mystified by that remark and couldn't imagine a less-fun job than the one I now faced: a monthly commitment to attend boring meetings and a responsibility to bone up on the most mind-numbing kind of reading – ordinances, regulations, and statutes.

My first year was difficult, as I struggled to learn my duties and responsibilities and grappled with how best to deal with a fickle public. But now I think the 'have fun' directive was a piece of advice: Don't take yourself too seriously. I have a tendency to do that anyway, so it took me a while to relax and enjoy what a planning commission can accomplish.

In my zeal to learn the ropes, I rolled up my sleeves and plowed through as many books and articles as I could find. Then, as each project or zoning application was set to come before our board, I researched the applicable regulations and statutes before the meeting, because I didn't want to make uninformed decisions – nor did I wish to look stupid in public.

The result was that I sometimes had a leg up on some of the other board members, and I occasionally found myself catching details others had missed. Yeah, that was fun.

Now in my eighth year on the board, I think I may have grasped some meaning in that comment and have concluded that, while his choice of words might have been better, he did know what he was talking about. Looking back at the projects and neighborhood issues that have passed through our hands on their way to the city council and then on to resolution and completion, I have to admit to feeling a sense of pride and accomplishment as well as one of satisfaction in knowing that I have had a hand in the future of my town."

– Roberta Peters, Sidney, Nebraska. From "Welcome to the Commission" (short essays by planning commissioners) in PCJ #39

Guardian of the Public Physical Environment

"The modern American planning commission is the guardian of the public physical environment. When this responsibility is forsaken, all citizens of the community, present and future, suffer losses that are ecological, cultural, and economic, as well as aesthetic. The planning commission that does not plan to promote and protect the positive features of the physical environment is derelict in its duties and betrays a public trust."

From Laurence C. Gerckens' "Community Aesthetics and Planning," in PCJ #8

Persistence Pays Off

In another Tip, I speak of the virtues of being patient. Too much patience, however, can lead to passivity and eventually paralysis.

You can be so intimidated by the consequences of the actions you are expected to take that you refuse to make anything but the most routine or mundane decisions.

In this Tip, let us consider the value of being persistent. Experience shows that problems not confronted only multiply and grow. You need not solve them all to gain community acceptance and credibility, but a willingness to be persistent in seeking answers, even if you take an unpopular stand on a controversial issue, is important.

Persistence also will cause you not to rely entirely on staff reports and recommendations. You should never feel too constrained by your lack of professional education to ask questions or even vote against a staff recommendation; neither should you appear to be looking over your shoulder, trying to anticipate and then vote according to the opinions of the majority of elected officials, or an influential segment of your community.

As a planning commissioner, you are expected to be fair, but also to be willing to express an informed opinion. But keep in mind that persistence is a trait that should be used sparingly.

A commissioner who is persistent to the point of being closed to other points of view and entrenched in his own can quickly become ineffective. "Don't pay attention to Joe. He never has an open mind on anything." Thus,

Persistence is a trait that should be used sparingly. A commissioner who is persistent to the point of being closed to other points of view and entrenched in his own can quickly become ineffective.

the board may politely hear Joe but not listen, because they believe Joe is not really listening to them.

If you tend to be persistent, examine your own motives. Do you know more about certain topics than other commissioners because of your background as a realtor, developer, attorney, planner, or other professional? Or, are you so reluctant to admit your lack of knowledge about some topic that stubbornly sticking to a position becomes a shield or defense mechanism?

In the first case, a willingness to share your knowledge with fellow board members may convince them of your point of view. In the latter, asking for information from the staff or others will win more points than staking out an unsubstantiated position.

All said, however, there may be times when you have weighed all the information, listened patiently to the public and the other commissioners, and still come to a principled conclusion that is neither popular nor supported by the majority of the board. If your colleagues respect you, they will respect your persistence. You may even win them over next time. ☒

Out in Left Field?

"Do sit down and have a long soul searching session with yourself if you find that you are consistently 'out in left field,' that no one seems inclined to second your profound motions, and that you are quite often a minority of one. You might be theoretically right, and probably are, but give some thought to what is practical, possible, and just. Don't be 'stiff-necked' in your opinions. Give a little."

From "The Riggins Rules," in PCJ #13

The First Law of Leadership

"You've thought hard about an important issue dividing your commission, and you have a reasonable compromise. But when you announce it, nothing happens. The other commissioners listen politely, then return to bickering.

What happened? You've just learned the first law of community leadership: To reason with people, you must understand – and deal with – what motivates them. Put another way, until you satisfy their instincts, you're not likely to reach their intellect.

This is why the best civic leaders – those who consistently find creative solutions and win support for them – spend so much time studying others' motivations. It's the key to getting people to work together."

From Otis White's "The Secret to Compromise: Learning to Read Others," in PCJ #16

Staff, Customer Service, Burnout

"Let's be honest. It is impossible to expect every commission meeting to be exciting and challenging."

Staff, Customer Service, Burnout

Staff Deserves TLC

Effective staff/commission relations are vital to the overall success of planning in your community, whether your agency has one, ten, or one hundred employees. Good will and an understanding of the pitfalls that impede sound relationships can help you solve the problems that inevitably arise.

Resist the temptation to "micro-manage." The longer you are on the planning board, the more familiar you will become with planning jargon and its rules and regulations. Still, though you will know more than most citizens, you should not expect to be a professional planner. Indeed, you would be less effective as a citizen planning commissioner if you were. You should have more than enough to do studying the issues and participating in policy decisions. Play your job well and let the staff know you expect them to do theirs.

Avoid the appearance of favoritism. At social gatherings or at business or professional affairs, do not succumb to the lure of playing the insider's role by even hinting you have proprietary information on planning matters. Do not contact the planning director or a staff member to suggest they talk to a friend or relative involved in an issue. You may be innocent of any improper motives, but staff may interpret your request as a form of intimidation or less than subtle directive to treat someone differently than other members of the public.

Control your public behavior. Never berate, downgrade, or insult the staff at a public meeting. Abusing them by making them the target or scapegoat before an angry populace may gain you some transitory public support. In the end, however, it will deteriorate what should be a long-term, mutually respectful relationship.

Remember the importance of a simple "thank you – you did a great job at the hearing last night." This can be just the right comment to uplift a harassed planning staff

when it appears the whole town has taken up arms against them. Take your planning director to lunch. Praise a particular piece of staff work at a public meeting. Write a letter of support to the mayor or city administrator. There are all manner of ways you can – and should – show your appreciation for your often overworked and undervalued planners.

Form and nurture a partnership. Accept the fact that there always will be some tension between commissioners and staff. You have different responsibilities and, often, different perspectives. But if you can develop a collegial partnership – and you can weather its ups and downs – everyone will benefit. ☒

Respect & Understanding

"Cultivating an atmosphere of mutual respect between staff and commission is essential. Hopefully, commissioners will come to respect the hard work their staff does and the staff's ability to act as counselors between conflicting stakeholders (oftentimes different departments within the city or county government), and their knowledge of the profession. No one says commissioners and staff have to agree, but showing respect is vital to the relationship."

– Glynis Jordan, Winston-Salem, North Carolina

"From an organizational perspective, I also think it's critical for staff and planning boards to have a clear understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities. In this context, as a staff planner I see my role as being in service to my boards, as broadly defined as needed to help us all do our jobs as best we can. This helps us work together efficiently and effectively. They don't hang me out to dry; I don't take it personally if they don't agree with all of my recommendations."

– Lee Krohn, Manchester, Vermont

Expectations

"Relationships involve expectations. What expectations will or should a planning commission have of the planning staff? Likewise, what expectations will or should the planning staff have of the commission? Without discussing the expectations each has of the other, misunderstandings are likely to result. … The simplest way to overcome the guessing game is for commissioners and staff to share their expectations with one another."

From Michael Chandler's "Commission and Staff: Expectations of Each Other," in PCJ #24

"Don't forget that the staff is there to help you in any way possible. It is composed of very capable professional people with vast experience. Lean on them heavily. They can pull you out of many a bad spot if you give them a chance. Or they may just sit and stew, if you do not give them the respect which is their due. Remember that their usual practice is to remain silent unless they are specifically asked to comment. Most consider it presumptuous and unprofessional to inject any unsolicited comments into the hearings. Always ask them to comment prior to the final vote."

From "The Riggins Rules," in PCJ #13

Customer Service Begins at the Front Door

The public sector seems to have recently discovered what the private sector has known for years – that satisfying its customers is a vital factor in assuring success. In planning, as in other fields of government, the citizen is the customer who should feel comfortable in the oftentimes alien environment of the planning office.

People who deal with planning departments can be divided into two general categories. There are the savvy contractors or developers who know all the rules and just want to get through the process as expeditiously and cheaply as possible. And there are the ordinary citizens who are requesting permission to make any of a myriad of major or minor changes to their property. They, too, want to get through the process as quickly as possible, but they may never have dealt with planning or zoning matters before. As a result, they may be nervous, uncertain, and perhaps even hostile.

Though the first category can be expected to know their way around and not be as sensitive to the surroundings as a citizen visiting for the first time, you have a respon-sibility to see that the environment each customer faces is welcoming and respectful.

Approach your planning office by putting yourself in the shoes of a typical member of the public. What does the front entry communicate? Is it a heavy wooden or glass door that is always closed shut? Notice how much more friendly and welcoming the environment is if you leave it ajar during regular hours or, at the least, make sure the door is easy to open.

Look carefully at all the directions or signs. Are they in plain English? If you have a significant minority population, you may need translations. Are

people directed easily to the zoning and permit department, or to wherever they can go for general information?

If someone cannot be at the front counter at all times, is there a bell or buzzer and is it answered promptly? If customers have to wait, are they told about how long it will be and is that estimate reasonable and accurate? Are there comfortable chairs and timely reading materials? A children's play corner? A pot of freshly brewed coffee?

Look at the walls. Are there faded or outdated posters or calendars, or perhaps nothing at all? Contact your local historical society or library for interesting photos they can rent or lend you.

In many offices, the planning counter is where most of the interaction between applicant and planner happens. Is it unnecessarily high and intimidating? How can you make it more accessible? Some people may be reluctant to talk about private matters in an open public area. Can you help them feel more comfortable by providing a screened-off corner or private room?

If you work with staff to scrutinize your planning office from the perspective of the customer/citizen, you should be able to find many ways to improve the environment without much additional cost. These are the first steps toward attaining that most important factor in assuring

A Focus on Service

"If you read the business section of any news magazine, you have seen articles about the changes in our economy. These articles have explored how shifts from manufacturing to service have changed our workforce. These trends have also changed our traditional view of management. Control of resources and the production process is no longer management's primary concern. Their focus is now on customer service and the quality and timeliness of service delivery.

Neither local government nor planning is immune to such changes. Planning officials are now finding themselves interacting with a smarter, more sophisticated, sometimes hostile public. People like this new emphasis on service and expect the same from local government.

Some planning programs are not only surviving, but thriving. Programs that have become valued partners in the community's agenda. These programs have adopted a new view towards planning in their communities. This view is more pragmatic about how planning should be conducted and expects results, quickly. People are viewed as customers who have problems that need to be solved. Programs are structured to help people learn how to solve their problems on their own or in partnership with local government. Such programs focus on customer service and the quality and timeliness of service delivery.

One of the key ways of reflecting a customer service philosophy is through good communications between the planning program and its 'customers.' [This] is a two-way street. Good communications involves both listening to what your customers are saying, as well as providing the information they need."

From Ray Quay's "Customer Service," in PCJ #1

Recognize and Relieve Burnout

Let's be honest. It is impossible to expect every commission meeting to be exciting and challenging. But if you rarely find them stimulating, you have three choices: change your attitude, try to change how things are done, or resign. Assuming you are still committed, the following are ways to deal with some common problems.

Meetings – too frequent and too long. This situation, especially if it is more the rule than the exception, is unfair to citizen commissioners as well as the public. It is a rare commission meeting that should go over three hours. Moreover, it is important to start within five minutes of the agreed-upon time and end accordingly.

If overly long and crowded meetings are a common problem with your planning board, look critically at your agendas. Are they sensible for the time allocated? It may be more productive to hold shorter, more focused meetings.

Place the most difficult or controversial issues early on the agenda when you, and the public, are fresh and alert. Appoint subcommittees to deal with issues that require in-depth review. And discipline yourselves to keep to the subject and avoid going off on tangents or irrelevancies.

Static roles and responsibilities. While only one person can and should be in charge of each meeting, it may be stimulating to rotate this responsibility. Even if you have a permanent chair, consider having someone with specific experience lead all or part of a meeting when that expertise is needed.

One format expected to fit all situations. Aside from formal hearings whose procedures are probably written down in state statute or your community's code, there are many ways your meetings can be flexible and innovative. Move out of city hall to a neighborhood school

You have three choices: change your attitude, try to change how things are done, or resign.

or community center. Hold a dialogue with the public before you make a decision. Consider "Robert's Rules" as less than ironclad. There is no one "right way" or meeting format.

Different players – same old debates. Put yourself in each applicant's shoes. Though you may think you have heard it all before, it is probably a new and intimidating experience for that individual. Do not lose sight of the contribution you make to good planning by maintaining and respecting your layperson's perspective. If everything were cut and dried, staff could make all the decisions. Be alert to the nuances that make each situation different. Challenge yourself each time and you can react to even the most routine matters with enlivened interest.

The big picture. Fatigue, boredom, and burnout are more likely if you rarely have the chance to look at the larger overriding issues – for example, to consider the distinct values of your community and how they can be enhanced by planning without the urgency of having to make a big decision. Schedule retreats or set aside time at some of your meetings and you will be refreshed and recharged to deal with even the most routine matters.

When is Enough, Enough?

"Look for signals that a change may be needed. No one is indispensable and no one who really is not interested in continuing should be coerced into remaining on the commission.

Lack of attendance is a sure sign that the individual considers the planning commission less important than other commitments. The board cannot and should not allow this to continue unaddressed. There are also those who attend in body only, obviously inattentive or disinterested most or all of the time.

The responsibility for recognizing the signs that members have either served too long or never will serve well rests primarily with the chair, but other commission members should not be shy about bringing this to the chair's attention.

But the most important duty is yours. If you personally feel tired and burned out, no matter how long or short a time you have served, do yourself and others a favor. Resign gracefully. If you know someone who fits that description, but is reluctant to seem to be a quitter, bring up the subject, tactfully but firmly.

The good of the community, and planning, deserves no less."

From Elaine Cogan's "When is Enough Enough?" in PCJ #36

Is burnout inevitable? No. Can it be avoided or turned around? Most likely. If you try at least some of the above and they do not work for you, do not consider it a personal failure. Be proud of the contributions you have made to your community's good planning health and accept the fact it may be time to move on. ☒

About the Author

Elaine Cogan, partner in the Portland, Oregon, planning and communications firm of Cogan Owens Cogan, has worked for more than thirty years with communities undertaking strategic planning and visioning processes. Since 1991, Ms. Cogan's "The Effective Planning Commissioner" column in the *Planning Commissioners Journal* has helped citizen planners across the country find ways of serving their communities most effectively.

Ms. Cogan has been honored for her work on a variety of citizen involvement projects, including "Complete Communities for Clackamas County," a comprehensive public outreach effort that received the American Planning Association's 2002 Public Education Award; an Award for Excellence from the International Association for Public Participation; and the National Association of Counties' Achievement Award.

In addition to her consulting for Cogan Owens Cogan, Ms. Cogan has served as an editorial columnist for the *Oregon Journal* and the *Oregonian* newspapers, while also providing radio and television commentary on a variety of public issues.

She is the author of *Successful Public Meetings: A Practical Guide*, published by the American Planning Association and now in its second edition, and co-author of *You Can Talk to (Almost) Anyone about (Almost) Anything: a Speaking Guide for Business and Professional People*, published by Portland State University. Ms. Cogan also wrote the chapters on public participation for the book, *Planners Use of Information*, and on public meetings for *Planning and Urban Design Standards*, both published by the American Planning Association.

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