

Commission and Staff: Expectations of Each Other

by Michael Chandler

Editor's Note: For many years Michael Chandler wrote "The Planning Commission at Work" column for the PCJ. We're reprinting here one of Chandler's columns that closely ties in to what you just read on the preceding pages.

In my last column, I looked at the relationship between the planning commission and the local governing body. In this column, I want to shift the focus to the important, but often overlooked, relationship between commission and staff.

Historically, the emergence of the planning commission as an important component of local government played a major role in the birth – and growth – of the planning profession. Accordingly, it seems fair to suggest that the commission and staff share a close relationship. As such, a challenge facing both commission and staff centers on identifying ways the relationship can be cooperative, as well as beneficial.

THE ROLE OF 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. This, in turn, can lead to publicly aired disagreements or squabbling that reflects poorly on both staff and commissioners.

The simplest way to overcome the guessing game is for commissioners and staff to share their expectations with one another. A work session or retreat can focus on discussing expectations.

If the planning commission and its staff can communicate with one another, the occasion for commission-staff entanglements will be minimized. This is critical because the business of planning is too important to be sidetracked as a

result of differences or difficulties involving the commission and staff.

Remember, the common goal of staff and commission is to serve the public good. This requires, above all, that all actions be taken in a fair, ethical, and consistent manner. ♦

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In my experience, here are ten of the most common expectations I've heard each "side" express:

COMMISSION EXPECTATIONS OF STAFF

- Be well organized and anticipate the type and kind of information the commission will need to perform its duties.
- Respond to requests for information in a timely and professional manner.
- Prepare accurate, well-documented, and well-written reports that, where appropriate, lay out options for the commission to consider.
- Leave personal or political bias out of reports.
- Provide exhibits, illustrations, and/or pictures to help commissioners visualize the location or layout of proposals.
- Help orient new commissioners, and provide educational opportunities for all members.
- Be accessible to all commissioners, whether in person, at meetings, or over the phone.
- Keep all commissioners equally informed; do not show favoritism.
- Make the commission decision work after it's made.
- Act in a fair, ethical, and consistent manner.

STAFF EXPECTATIONS OF COMMISSION

- Prepare for meetings by reading all reports and by visiting (if legal in your community) each site on the agenda.
- Whenever possible, call staff with your questions before the meeting, so answers can be researched and shared during the meeting.
- Examine all the facts on a given issue and make the best decision possible.
- Do not ridicule or make light of the staff in public; instead, provide criticism in private.
- Do not assume the staff is wrong and citizen is right when there is a disagreement.
- Compliment the staff when and where appropriate.
- Trust and respect the staff.
- If the commission disagrees with a staff recommendation, explain your reasoning.
- Do not hold a grudge if you disagree with a staff recommendation.
- Act in a fair, ethical, and consistent manner.



On-Line Comment:

"I am a planning commissioner in a small town (population 1578). Mike's article hits on the very heart of where problems begin, lack of clear expectations. We have a permanent part-time zoning administrator. That is our only staff. Perhaps the most important expectation is CONSISTENCY"! While the commissioners may or may not agree with the job the zoning administrator does, we all expect him to be consistent in administering our zoning ordinance. Lack of consistency leads to public perception of favoritism or incompetence."

— Dennis Riggan, Rock Hall, Maryland

What Planners Wish Their Planning Commissioners Knew

by Jim Segedy, Ph. D., FAICP, and Lisa Hollingsworth-Segedy, AICP

Lisa recently visited with Paulding County, Georgia's Planner, Chris Robinson, whose career has included work at two regional planning commissions, two counties, one city, and one state agency. She asked him "over the years and in all the places where you have worked as a planner, what did you wish your planning commissioners knew?"

Chris' answers started us down a road studded with memories of our own experiences over the years as we worked to empower planning commissioners at their job. It never hurts to remind ourselves who we are, and what we're doing on the planning commission in the first place.

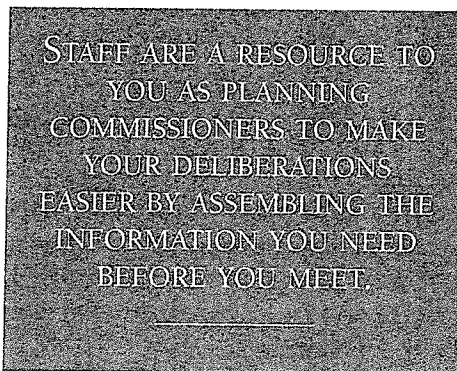
So with our thanks to Chris for his perspective, and apologies to David Letterman, here's our Top Ten List of things planners wish their planning commissioners knew. One caveat: each state has slightly different planning and zoning laws, and local commissions' procedures will vary. Still, the basic ideas we set out should be relevant for most of you.

10. *The responsibilities and duties of being a planning commissioner.* Planning commission involvement is not an appointment to accept for status or just to add to your resume. It involves training, study, and preparation for every meeting. You will need a clear understanding of the commission's role in administrative and legislative actions, as well as legal issues such as due process, "takings," preemption, and more.

Planning commissioners are responsible for working together to ensure that the community grows and develops according to the vision established in the plan. As you consider an appointment (or accepting a re-appointment) carefully consider the significant commitment required, from the amount of time involved in preparing to make informed

decisions to the (potentially lengthy) meetings each month.

9. *Proper adoption of the zoning ordinance, map, and amendments is very important.* Planning commissioners should be familiar with their state's code language that spells out the procedures for how a zoning ordinance and/or map can be amended. Requirements for advertising and public hearings are the most common items addressed, but some states specify additional standards.



8. *The relationship between the comprehensive plan and the zoning ordinance.* Your comprehensive plan (or master plan, or something similar) is the critical guidance document for your community. It likely contains an examination of current conditions, identifying goals and objectives for the future, and a general framework for how to achieve those goals – and why. The plan establishes the framework for decision-making and the public purpose for local government regulations pertaining to land use.

7. *The definition of "hardship" when granting a variance.* Typically, a variance from the zoning code's standards is allowed only when there is a "hardship on the property." In other words, the property cannot be developed under the current rules because of specific conditions on the site or its unusual configuration. "Hardship," as the word is defined in zoning codes, does not relate to the

financial well-being of the property owner, or whether the site could generate greater profit (that is, more than a "reasonable return") if a variance were granted. As one of the leading treatises on zoning law states, "the courts have consistently held that a variance may not be granted solely on the ground that such relief will enable the applicant to make a greater profit."¹

The technical zoning definition of hardship is too often ignored by planning and zoning boards (the body authorized to grant variances differs from state to state). One consequence of this, and of too readily granting variances, is that the community's zoning ordinance and comprehensive plan will be undermined. Bottom line: it is important to know the criteria in your ordinance for granting variances, and then make decisions in accordance with those criteria.

6. *Politics is for politicians – not planning commissioners.* In most places, planning commission appointments are made by elected officials. Sometimes these officials have "expectations" about their appointees and the decisions they are called on to make. This has the potential of damaging the commission's integrity as an independent body. As Greg Dale (who has frequently written on ethical issues for the PCJ) has noted: "As a planning commissioner you have an ethical obligation to remain in a position of objectivity and fairness. Any time you take a position at the urging of an elected official, you run the risk of tainting your credibility as an objective decision-maker."²

One of the fundamental purposes behind the creation of planning commissions early in the 20th century was to

¹ Anderson's *American Law of Zoning*, 4th Edition, Sec. 20.23, p. 495.

² "Who Do You Work For," in *PCJ #16* (reprinted in *Taking a Closer Look: Ethics & the Planning Commission*; for details: www.plannersweb.com/ethics.html).

Just What Is the Job of a Planning Commissioner?

by PCJ Editor, Wayne Senville

The primary goal of the *Planning Commissioners Journal* has always been to help citizen planners – especially members of local planning and zoning boards – do their job better. But just what is the job of a planning commissioner?

We want to re-examine this broad question in light of what our talented contributors have had to say over the past twenty years. So go get yourself a cup of coffee or tea, sit back, and thumb through the following pages.

Some of the keenest observations on the role planning commissioners play have – not surprisingly – come from commissioners themselves. Over the years, many planning board members have drawn on their own experiences in writing for the PCJ.

An Obligation to Contribute

“Recognize that you have an obligation to contribute to your planning and zoning meeting, even if you don’t have a set of initials following your name and can’t name the planner who laid out the streets of Paris. It’s not a ‘chance’ to contribute; it’s an ‘obligation’ by virtue of your appointment. Study any staff reports, maps, and the like, and come prepared to contribute ... Planning commissions are places for people who care and want to make a difference to their communities.” – *Steven R. Burt, Sandy City, Utah* (100)

Ask Questions

“Once appointed, don’t be reluctant to ask questions of other board members and the planning staff. The staff is there to assist and advise the board. At your board’s public meetings, ask questions. Other board members, or citizens in attendance, may have the same question in the back of their mind. The old adage ‘the only dumb question is the one not asked’ is true.” – *Stephen F. DeFeo, Jr., Methuen, Massachusetts* (234)

Think Before You Respond

“Think carefully before you respond to demands from citizens and developers. Often a salient issue will come to the attention of citizens before you, as a board member, have all the



facts. Resist the urge to express your opinion until you are sure about where you stand on the issue.” – *Cheryl R. Roberts, Huntersville, North Carolina* (234)

Put Aside Your Own Biases

“Put personal preferences and prejudices aside to deliberate on technical issues and application merits, and be proactive to seek changes to local zoning laws where deficiencies have been identified.” – *Louis Joyce, Alloway Twp., New Jersey* (467)

“Try very hard to see both sides of an issue. It’s easy to vilify developers as uncaring, manipulative, and simply out

to make a profit. But remember that it is not a crime to make a reasonable profit ... With this said, commissioners have a duty to protect the public, follow the general plan, and enforce the city code – and sometimes a project just does not conform to that mandate.” – *Fedolia “Sparky” Harris, Elk Grove, California* (467)

Make the Right Decision, Not the Popular One

As Carolyn Braun noted in “Planning From Different Perspectives” (170):

“As planning commissioners, I’m sure you have heard difficult requests from friends or neighbors that do not comply with the code. It is hard not to be empathetic with your neighbors. They stand before you, looking at you, hoping you – of all people – will understand and help them. After all, you live there. Silently, you wonder whether granting the request would be that bad. After all, it really wouldn’t hurt

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alongside the published article – as was the case with Cogan’s article on consensus building:

“As Chairman of the Plan Commission in the Town of Dodgeville, Wisconsin, 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.

“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., Gulf Shores, Alabama.

ning commissioner in Colorado – reminded commissioners to:

“Make sure to take the time to read and understand the information presented in the staff reports prior to the meeting. Staff really appreciates commissioners who have read their packet and we can always tell by the questions asked at the meeting who has or hasn’t.” – from “Sitting on Both Sides of the Table” (467)

Along similar lines, Cynthia Eliason – another planner who’s also served as a planning commissioner (in California) – emphasized:

“Do your homework! There is nothing worse than coming to the meeting and hearing the ripping open of meeting packets for the first time.” (467)

What’s On Your Agenda?

How much thought do we give to our meeting agendas? In many cases, not enough. As Elaine Cogan described in “First on the Agenda is the Agenda” (251):

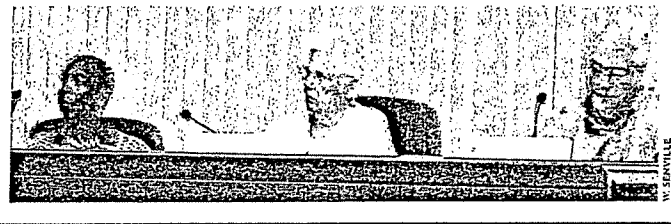
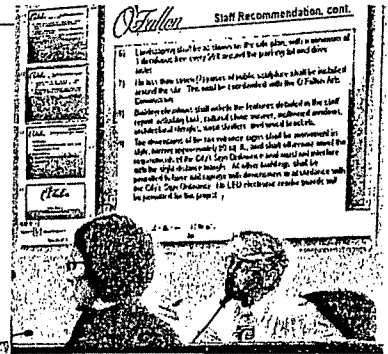
“The agenda is the template for your meetings. It should be developed thoughtfully so that the planning board has adequate time for matters that require attention and/or decisions and less time for ‘house-keeping’ or more routine subjects. It should delineate plainly when public comment is invited and the actions

expected of each item (review only; action; referral).

Many commissions leave the agenda writing to staff and may see it for the first time when they come to the meeting. This does not serve you or the public well. The best approach is for the chair, or a committee of your board, to review the agenda before it is final and for commissioners to receive it and any backup materials several days in advance.

Allow ample and early time for issues which most concern the public. ... 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.”

Meeting of the O’Fallon, Illinois, Planning Commission. Chairman Gene McCoskey is at far right of photo at bottom. Note how staff uses the large screen to allow the public to easily view information about the project under review.



Setting the Right Tone

One of the most important steps a planning commission can take is to set the right tone at the very start of a meeting. During my 2007 cross-country trip on U.S. Route 50, I attended a meeting of the O’Fallon, Illinois, Planning Commission. Chairman Gene McCoskey did a terrific job in creating a welcoming atmosphere. He opened the meeting by providing brief introductions of the commissioners and staff, a review of how the meeting would be run and when public comment would be taken; and an explanation of the planning commission’s role in the project review process.

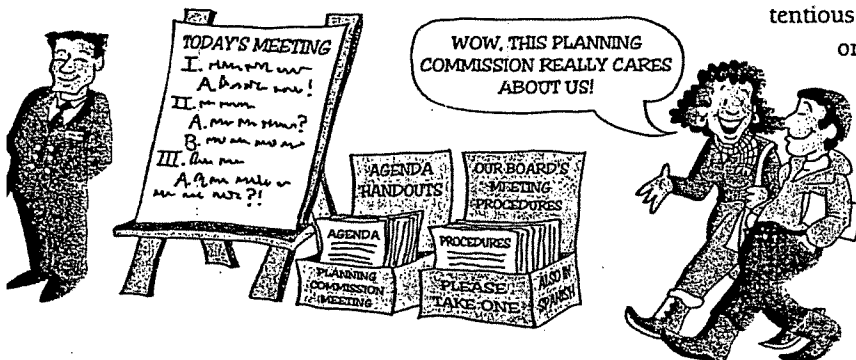
McCoskey and his fellow commissioners listened intently during lengthy, sometimes angry, public comments about a development proposal on the

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Getting Prepped

How to run, participate in, and benefit from meetings are topics we’ve regularly covered. But it’s important to remember that the “job” of a planning commissioner doesn’t start when the meeting is called to order and end when it is adjourned.

James Shockey – who’s served as both a planner and a plan-



exact hour, and the hearing begin, if there is a quorum. If you have to wait ten minutes for a quorum and there are 100 people in the room, the straggler has ... created a very bad beginning for what is a very important occasion for most of those present.

- Don't mingle with friends, acquaintances, unknown applicants or objectors in the audience before the meeting or during a recess period, if it can be politely avoided. You will invariably create the impression ... that there is something crooked going on, especially when you vote favorably on the case of the applicant you were seen conversing with.

- Do your homework. Spend any amount of time necessary to become thoroughly familiar with each matter which is to come before you. It is grossly unfair to the applicant and to the City for you to act on a matter with which you have no previous knowledge or with which you are only vaguely familiar. And you will make some horrible and disturbing decisions.

- Do be attentive. Those appearing before you have probably spent hours and hours preparing and rehearsing their arguments. The least you can do is listen and make them think that you are as interested as you should be. Refrain from talking to other members, passing notes and studying unrelated papers.

- Don't use first names in addressing anyone at all during the course of the hearing. This includes audience, applicants, members of your particular body, even if the person concerned is your brother or your best friend. Nothing, repeat nothing, creates a more unfavorable impression on the public than this practice.

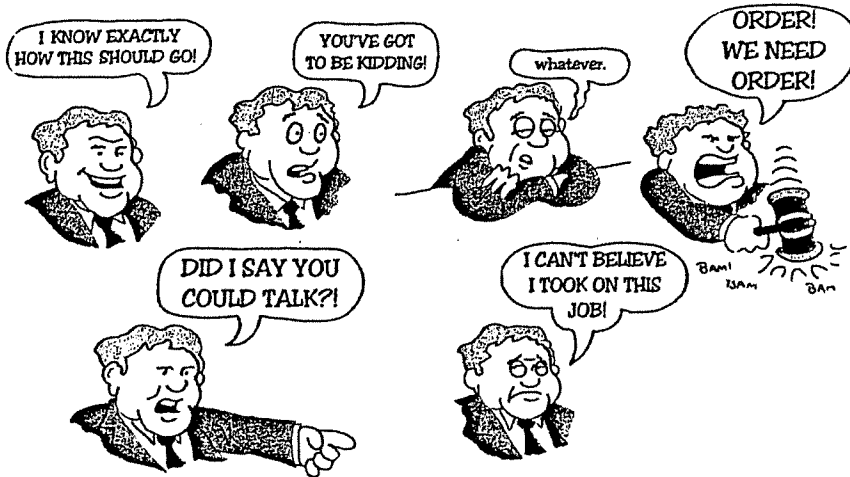
- Don't try to make the applicant or any other person appearing before you look like a fool by the nature of your questions or remarks. This is often a temptation, especially when it is apparent that someone is being slightly devious and less than forthright in his testimony. But don't do it.

- 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 let you stew, if you do not give them the respect which is their due."

If Our Meetings Could Talk

Quite a few of the Riggins Rules relate to two critically important topics we've covered extensively: ethical matters (such as ex parte contacts and conflicts of interest) and the relationship between commissioners and staff. We'll turn to them shortly. But first, allow us a few minutes to talk more broadly about the nature of meetings – and how they can be made more productive.

On this point, we need to introduce (or re-introduce) you to Mike Chandler, who for eleven years wrote "The Planning Commission At Work" column for the *PCJ*. During this time, Chandler was also the "go to" speaker at planning commission training workshops around the country. In one of his *PCJ* columns he asked what we'd hear if our meetings could talk:



"During our planning commission training sessions we spend a considerable amount of time exploring the nature of meetings. One of the more interesting exercises involves having the participants complete the following question: 'If our planning commission meetings could talk what might they say?'"

As you might suspect, this question has generated some very interesting responses. We've had meetings tell us: 'I'm happy that's over. I feel good. I've got more to do. What a great meeting. I need a drink. If that happens one more time I'll do something you will regret.' Who ever said meetings don't have a sense of humor!

Another exercise that generates much discussion involves determining why some planning commission meetings succeed while others fail.

Commonly cited reasons for successful commission meet-

ings include: the meeting started on time; the commission followed the agenda; the public was able to participate; the meeting accomplished a predetermined task; and, the meeting did not last too long.

Reasons for meeting failure usually include the absence of the attributes listed above. In addition, commission meetings may not be successful if commissioners fail to do their homework; if the commission chair is weak or ineffectual; or if the meeting sequence is haphazard or disjointed. – from "Making the Most of Your Meeting Time" (451)

Before leaving behind the arena of meetings, there are two more "pieces of business" we want to bring to your attention – first, the importance of rules of order, and second, the danger of ex parte contacts.

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For more on how to hold effective public meetings and hearings:

- Wayne Senville, "Dealing With Contentious Public Hearings" (380)
- Ric Stephens, "Ten Things to Avoid" (347)
- Elaine Cogan, "Meeting Formats Should Follow their Functions" (248)
- Ric Stephens, "Late Nights with the Commission" (138)
- Debra Stein, "Dealing With An Angry Public" (233)
- Elaine Cogan, "How Well Do You Use Your Time?" (474)

Not Ex Parte Contacts

I recall when Greg Dale submitted the first draft of this article, one concern I had was to be sure planning commissioners realized that there are, in fact, many times when they can and should speak with others about planning issues. Dale agreed, and added the following section:

"It might seem to some that the concerns I've expressed about ex parte contacts would result in planning commissioners being insulated from the community, at the same time that we are asking them to reflect its planning values. Here is an important distinction to make: ex parte concerns relate primarily to matters that are pending before the commission, primarily related to requests for development approvals such as zone changes, planned unit developments, site plan approvals, and other similar requests that involve a specific, legally prescribed process of review.

On the other hand, we do expect planning commissions to concern themselves with long range, community-wide planning policies and issues outside the development review process. This requires planning commissioners to be in tune, and in touch, with citizens who are interested in planning issues. ...

It is entirely appropriate for commissioners to participate in community organizations and use those opportunities to discuss planning issues ... as long as these do not involve specific case matters pending before the commission."

Citizen Planners

In thinking about the role of planning commissioners, how

many of us are aware of the early history of planning commissions in America? Let's take a short trip with planning historian Laurence Gerckens – national historian for the American Institute of Certified Planners and a frequent contributor to the *PCJ* – as he recounts how citizen planners helped turn around one Midwestern city [392]

"It's easy to sit back and wait for problems to arrive at the planning commission. All of a commissioner's time can be spent stamping out brushfires and processing standard reviews. But it is worth recalling that citizen planning commissioners were put in that position ... to provide insights into the problems and potential of the community, and to provide leadership in the solution of problems before they arise.

Consider the history of the Cincinnati Planning Commission: On January 4, 1914, a group of civic minded individuals and representatives of the community development committees of a number of Cincinnati organizations founded the

'United City Planning Committee.' ... Through the medium of community planning, these Cincinnatians were seeking a more rational, publicly open, and less expensive system for the provision of needed capital facilities than the system of secret agreements, payoffs, and bribes that determined public development policy in Cincinnati at the time. ...

The Committee charged [Alfred] Bettman with drafting state enabling legislation authorizing the creation of local, citizen dominated municipal planning commissions, giving these groups the power to create and adopt a general development plan for their communities. ... In May of 1915 the Ohio legislature enacted the first planning enabling law in the United States ...

The Cincinnati City Planning Commission ... helped bring order, rationality, and economy to Cincinnati through: the integration of future land-uses, transportation facilities, and public utilities and facilities in a long-range comprehensive plan; the use of the land-use

zoning power to shape future community form; and the use of carefully prepared six year capital budgets designed to allow for development while keeping tax expenditures at a low, even rate.

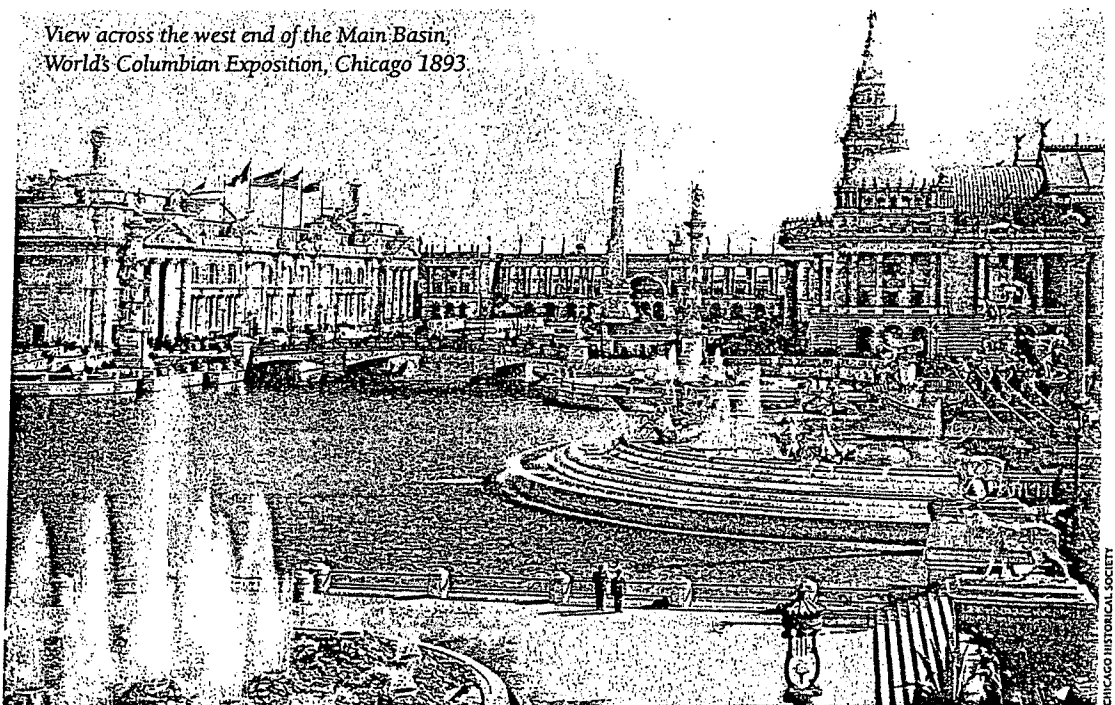
The bold and creative efforts of the citizen-member dominated Planning Commission shaped not only the city of Cincinnati, but also, through its example and leadership, the community planning practices of the entire country." – from *"Community Leadership & the Cincinnati Planning Commission"* [392]

It Happened In Chicago

Let's take one step even farther back in time. In 1893 an event occurred in Chicago that profoundly affected the role citizens would come to play in shaping the future of their communities. Americans in the late 19th century were wrestling with the effects of rapid urban growth and development. But when they came to visit Chicago that year – as they did by the

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View across the west end of the Main Basin, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago 1893.



“When a shopping center is proposed, when the question of what is wetland and what isn’t hits the fan, when people line up to protest the conversion of a single family residence to some sort of a group home, the local area newspapers are quick to point out that the ‘planners’ did this, or the ‘planners’ did that.

And who are these planners? Well, they’re not those professionally trained planners, with degrees in planning. They are the members of local planning boards or commissions. They are, for the most part, volunteers, unpaid volunteers I might add, who give hours of their time, mostly in the evenings – carrying out the mandates of local and state land use planning laws.

The work, at times, gets tedious. Hours and hours of discussion as to whether a proposed land use meets the requirements of the zoning or subdivision ordinance, is consistent with all the codes, is not discriminatory, is or isn’t a landmark, and so on. There are, indeed, so many items on the agenda that board members sometimes wonder what happened to the Big Picture.

The Big Picture is, indeed, a vital part of a planning board’s responsibilities. ... The public, through legislatures, gives planning boards broad mandates. In addition, the specifics vary from

one location to another, but the fact remains that people turn to planning boards to secure a high quality of living environment.

You get the picture. What society wants from its planners is something more than the processing of permits. It would like the processing of some vision, as well. Not an easy row to hoe. But enormously fruitful if faithfully tended.

The question is often posed, however: how do we deal with the Big Picture when there are so many little pictures we’re lucky to get home in time for the 11 p.m. news? One thing is certain: the board has to make it happen.”

The Planning Universe

If you’ve been a regular reader of the *PCJ*, you know that we’ve often focused on what we’ve called the “planning universe” – those individuals and groups (or planets, if you will) in the planning commission’s orbit: lawyers; developers; planning consultants; the media; and so on.

But there are three that are especially important to planning commissions: citizens; the governing body; and last, but not least, planning staff.

Citizen Input

We’ve already touched on the need to be respectful to citizens

during public hearings, in listening to what they have to say. But gaining input from citizens outside the formal hearing process is just as important.

As then Arlington County, Virginia, planning commissioner Monica Craven explained:

“An effective planning commission reaches out to the community and does not limit its interaction with the community to a single public hearing. With the help of the planning staff, the planning commission can organize and participate in outreach efforts such as public forums and walking tours, to name a few.” – from *“Planning Commissioner Perspectives”* [322]

Along similar lines, Elaine Cogan spoke of the value in planners and planning commissioners going out to actively solicit public feedback:

“It was a sunny Friday. People were at their local mall as usual, shopping, strolling, meeting their friends and neighbors. Prominent among the storefronts, in the center of all the activity, was something new: a display about Our Town – what it is and what it might become, depending on the planning decisions that soon would be made.

Maps and drawings and possible alternatives in simple text were displayed attractively. Staff and commissioners stood nearby to engage onlookers in conversation and entice them to participate.

People were invited to stay as long as they liked – to write their comments on the displays and handy pads of paper, talk to planners, fill out questionnaires, and otherwise participate in a low-key but important exercise to help determine their community’s future.

From more than 25 years experience designing and facilitating public participation processes, it is obvious to me that the most successful are those where we go out to the people – not expect them to come to us.” – from *“Getting Out to Where the People Are”* [383]

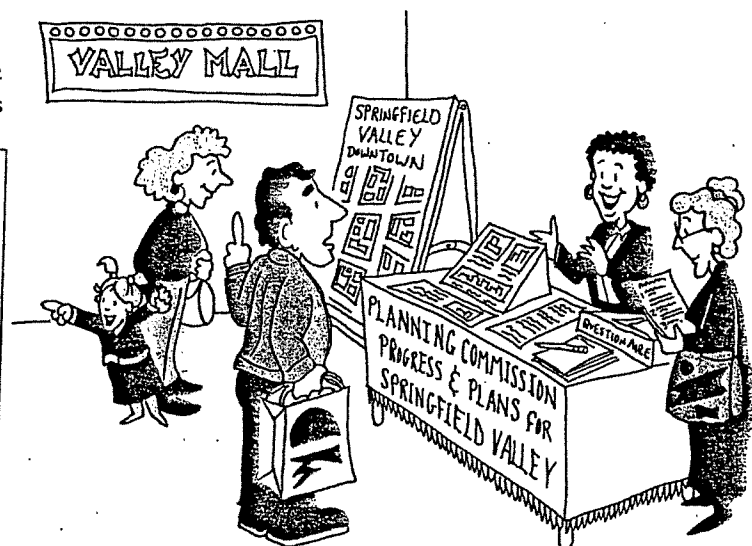
Engage the Community

As Otis White noted in *“Getting Power By Giving It Away”* [313]: “By itself, a planning commission has limited powers. But allied with an involved and supportive community, its powers can be enormous.”

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More articles on citizen involvement in planning:

- Michael Chandler, “Citizen Planning Academies” [309]
- Thomas Miller, “Citizen Surveys: Taking Your Community’s Pulse” [377]
- Elaine Cogan, “Habla Usted Espanol?” [112]
- Elaine Cogan, “On Gauging Public Opinion” [314]
- Kathleen McMahon, “Public Outreach Through Video” [256]
- Kit Hodge, “The Next Generation of Your Planning Commission” [250]



will not happen too often)."

But, as he added: "Don't let this discourage you. Instead, look for ways your commission can advance the cause of good planning, and strengthen its relationship with the governing body. Remember that as a planning commissioner you're responsible for focusing on the long-term. Most elected officials appreciate this forward thinking role because it allows them to gauge the public's receptivity to future courses of action." — from *"Linking Elected Officials with Planning"* (139)

Remain Above Politics

Don't forget this advice from Jim Segedy:

"The planning commission's marching orders are to provide the best advice to the governing body as laid out in the comprehensive plan, mindful of the potentially evolving notion of the health, safety, and welfare of the whole community. Planning commissioners MUST remain above politics." — from *"Putting Some Oomph Into Planning"* (560)

Consider also some cautionary words Greg Dale wrote about the relationship between elected officials and planning commissioners.

"As an appointed planning commissioner you are not designated to represent any special interest group. Neither are you appointed to represent the 'voice' of an elected official. More specifically, as a planning commissioner you have an ethical obligation to remain in a position of objectivity and fairness.

Your position should not be used to seek political favors, nor should you create a perception that you are seeking political goodwill in your action.

Every time you take a position at the urging of an elected official,

you run the risk of tainting your credibility as an objective decision-maker. In addition, contacts that you have outside of the public meeting process may fall in the category of *ex parte* contacts." — from *"Who Do You Work For?"* (545)

Staff Relations

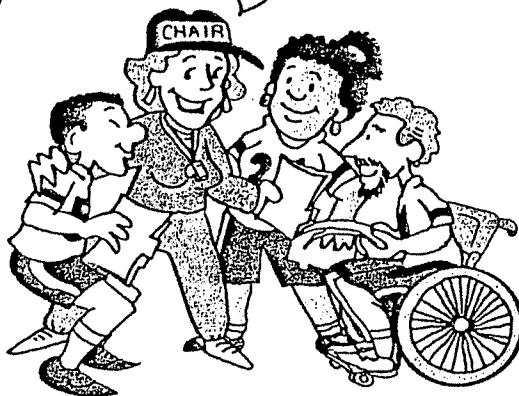
It almost goes without saying that if planning commissioners and staff don't have a good working relationship, the community's planning efforts will be badly handicapped. It is essential for both commissioners and staff to understand their respective roles, and to work cooperatively.

In "Sitting on Both Sides of the Table" (467), several planning commissioners who have also worked as professional planners spoke to this:

- "The ideal situation is that the board and staff see themselves as a team, each with distinct but equal roles. Staff is there to do the heavy lifting regarding the board's submission standards and plan reviews and the board's job is to determine if the submission meets the relevant approval criteria." — Aaron Henry, Danvers, Massachusetts.

- "Open communication is the best way to have a great

WE ARE A GREAT TEAM
TOGETHER! WE CAN DO THIS!



working relationship. Talking outside of the monthly meetings is a great way to build a rapport between staff and commissioners. Communication is the key." — Austin Bless, Winnebago, Minnesota.

- "Don't take the staff or the professional planner's word on everything. Ask for an explanation. Commissioners need to understand that the staff's job is to interpret the regulations but the decision making process is not just a checklist. There is room for subjectivity as well, otherwise there is no need for the commission." — Tim Jackson, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Along these lines, Greg Dale in "Independent and Informed" (133) noted that: "Planning commissions should take full advantage of staff expertise in making decisions. However, both commission and staff should recognize the obligation of the commission to act in an independent manner."

We'll leave the final word in our overview of the role of the planning commissioner with Elaine Cogan. In "Staff Needs a Little TLC, Too" (440) Cogan reminded planning commissioners to:

- "Resist the temptation to 'micro-manage' ... you are not expected to be a professional

planner. Indeed, you would be less effective as a citizen planning commissioner if you were. Even if you are a successful professional or businessperson, it is not appropriate to try to tell the planning director whom to hire or fire or how you think the agency should be managed. You should have more than enough to do studying the issues and making policy decisions."

From my own experience as a planning commissioner, I can say "amen" to Elaine Cogan's remarks — and to the many thoughtful comments and suggestions we've heard from commissioners, staff, and others across the country over the past twenty years. Thank you all for making my job as editor of the PCJ so much easier.

PlannersWeb

We hope you enjoyed this overview of what planning commissioners do. As we mentioned at the start, when our redesigned and updated *PlannersWeb* site is up and running this summer, you'll be able to access the nearly 500 articles we've published — including all the articles referenced in what you just read. Join us as charter members as we move online. ♦

Wayne M. Senville has been publisher and editor of the *Planning Commissioners Journal* since its founding in



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