

Ten Tips for New Commissioners

First "Daze" on the Planning Board

Many planning commissioners look back with a sense of humor at their first days -- or, perhaps more accurately, first "daze" -- as a member of their planning board.

For many new planning board members, it's like entering a strange world, with its own special language and rules.

The primary purpose of this Guide is to help new board members more quickly feel comfortable in their "job" as a planning commissioner (or, in some parts of the country, as a "plan commissioner"). But veteran members should find much of interest as well.

The first part of the Guide contains some "tips" for your consideration. Many of the tips are from your colleagues -- that is, individuals who have served as planning board members.

The second part of the Guide introduces you to some of the players in the "planning universe" you're likely to encounter along the way -- including, most importantly, your local governing body.

But first, I thought you might enjoy hearing Mike Chandler recount his first days or "daze" as a member of the Blacksburg, Virginia, Planning Commission (since that early experience, Mike has moved on to become one of the best teachers of planning skills in the country ... and author of a regular column in the *Planning Commissioners Journal*).

"I recall rather vividly my initial commission meeting; in part because I had just broken my ankle. My movement was tentative and uncertain as I was unable to coordinate the crutches with my arms and legs. My sense of rhythm -- which has never been great -- was completely missing. In the words of my youngest child, I moved like a 'klutz.'

Once I settled into my seat and the meeting started, it did not take long for me to dismiss the crutches as a problem. In short order, colleagues began using the king's English in a manner that sounded almost foreign. They spoke at length about a PUD and its special relationship to open space. They also spent a fair amount of time talking about floor area ratio and density bonuses.

I was perplexed. The words sounded familiar, but they made little sense in the context of the discussion.

PUD sounded like a dog running loose in an open field and floor area ratio with density bonus sounded like a carpeting job.

But this could not be right. This was a planning commission meeting. What was wrong with me? Was I missing something? What was this language I was hearing and what did it mean?

Fortunately for me, a veteran of the commission took me

aside at the conclusion of the meeting and reassured me that all was well. He told me that planners had a language all their own. I would have to learn what was meant one meeting at a time. As my seasoned colleague put it, planning was like learning how to drive: it would take awhile and there would be frustrations along the way; however, I would probably make it."

Mike is not alone in having a memorable first meeting. I remember my own experience. Even though I had a background in planning, I was nervous. I didn't know most of the other commissioners. I wasn't quite sure about how to participate. And, as luck would have it, my first meeting included a controversial neighborhood project -- and a crowd of about fifty people seemed to be focusing their eyes on me, knowing that I was going to have to vote "yes" or "no" on a project of special importance to them.

Many planning board members have gone through a similar experience -- or have, like Mike Chandler, felt the strangeness at being suddenly thrust into a world with its own peculiar language.

I hope this Guide will help make your transition to planning board member a bit easier and more rewarding.

Wayne M. Senville, Editor
Planning Comm's Journal

LISTEN!

When They Speak, Do You Listen?

"I know you hear me, but are you listening?" Nearly shouting with exasperation, a frustrated citizen confronted her community's planning commission after a particularly heated public meeting on a controversial zone change.

The chair of the commission took exception to her question. "Of course we're listening. What do you think we've been doing the last four hours?"

They may have thought they were listening, but the decision made by the planning commissioners soon after the meeting did nothing to convince a skeptical public. The commissioners voted unanimously to endorse their previous stand on the issue without any acknowledgment of the public comments they had ostensibly been "listening to" the previous four hours.

It is possible that no amount of public discussion would have changed the opinions -- and the votes -- of the planning commissioners, and it is entirely within their rights to reaffirm their original opinion. But once they opened up the discussion to the citizens, they should have showed by their questions and other responses that they considered the public's input seriously before they took another vote. "Why did we bother to come? They didn't even hear what we were saying," is a reasonable public

evaluation of the proceedings that occurred. ...

Be aware of what you say and how you say it. When you answer or respond to a public comment, do you engage in a dialogue or in a monologue? In other words, do you have your set speech or point-of-view no matter what the citizens say, or do your responses show you were listening?

One effective approach is to respond to each individual by name. If you are not personally acquainted, give your memory a boost by jotting down their names as they introduce themselves. Then, take care to couch your response or comments in terms the citizen has raised. "Yes, Mrs. Jones, I can understand your concern that widening the street will take out those two old oak trees. Several of your neighbors have also raised that issue."

... During the commissioners' discussion after the public comment period is over, look for ways to give further evidence you were listening. "According to what we've heard today, several citizens seem to think that it is better to save the trees than widen the street. I would like to explore this further before we make a decision." Or, even if you think the citizens are off track, you should acknowledge what you heard, and then go on to state why you disagree.

Most citizens are reasonable, and understand you cannot always give them what they

want. But they do want -- and deserve -- to have their points-of-view listened to and acknowledged.

From, "When They Speak Do You Listen?" by Elaine Cogan (PCJ #2)

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.

From, "The Riggins Rules, #12" by Fred Riggins (PCJ #13)

All the People

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.

Neither are minorities who do not speak English well or understand bureaucratic procedures. It is important to give polite attention to everyone -- people you may not want as friends or neighbors, newcomers as well as those whose forebears settled the place.

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

TIP #2 FOR NEW COMMISSIONERS

EDUCATE YOURSELF

Learning the Language

You have been active in community organizations and causes. You are intelligent and enthusiastic. You have even attended some planning commission meetings, like that time there was a rezoning in your neighborhood. You know what planning is all about, right?

Then you get your first agenda packet and you discover there are a few things about planning you do not know.

The agenda and its staff reports are written in a language you only partially understand.

Common words seem to have different meanings and some words have no meaning to you: "variance," "findings," "conditional uses," "nonconforming," "mitigation measures." Many new planning commissioners leave their first meeting feeling dazed and confused.

As a new commissioner you need to have some early orientation or training so that you can better understand what is expected of you and so that you can do a better job sooner. The training can come from many different sources. Your planning department staff or a consultant can provide it soon after your appointment. You can attend a seminar or conference with special sessions for new commissioners. You can study on your own and talk to "old" commissioners. ...

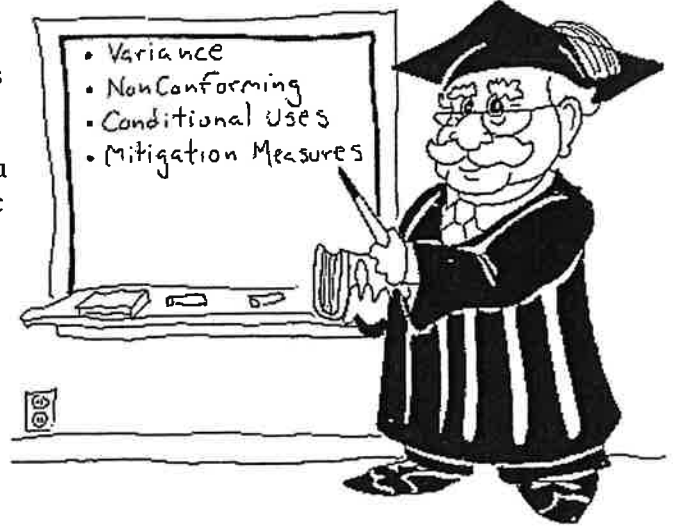
Most of a planning commissioner's work is done at meetings.

Meetings are where you interact with the public and developers, hold hearings, and make decisions on the cases before you. While it is the chair's responsibility to keep the meeting running smoothly, you should know enough meeting protocol to make proper motions. You also need to know your state's open meeting laws and conflict of interest laws

The respective roles of staff, commission, and governing body are especially important. You were appointed to fulfill your role, not staff's and not the governing body's. It is very important that you understand how this works in your community.

Usually the most difficult for the new commissioner are the environmental regulations and procedures. These must be understood in order to make intelligent decisions on a project. These are more difficult because they cover many areas of expertise -- biology, botany, geology, air quality, water supply/quality, and so on. While your understanding of these issues will grow as you gain experience as a commissioner, training programs can give you a better foundation.

From, "The New Commissioner - Dazed & Confused," by Sharon Wiley Hightower (PCJ #24)



Getting Oriented

Get to know your material and your commission make-up as soon as possible. Zoning codes can be unwieldy and difficult to read through. Mucking through the sign provisions of your zoning code can be pretty tiring. It's better to orient yourself by sitting down with the retiring commission member, the chair, or another experienced member. Let them quickly outline the various documents and maps with which you will be working.

Not only will these individuals concisely summarize the zoning structure, they will often identify the controversial areas, and the political and public hot potatoes that can lead to lengthy meetings and distressed neighbors. They may also give you a better understanding of the group dynamics in which you will work.

From, "Orient Yourself," by Theresa Long (PCJ #39)

BE POLITE ... AND PATIENT

Common Civility

Too many public meetings degenerate into name calling and chaos through neglect of common civility. Citizens who brave ice storms, heat waves, or the comfort of their living rooms to show up at a public forum deserve our respect, no matter how we feel about their opinions. It is important that public officials speak in measured tones, address each person appropriately, and otherwise model the kind of behavior they expect from the audience.

Is your tone sarcastic or angry? Most perpetrators of this behavior usually accompany their words with folded arms and frowns. "Well, sure, you just never saw the signs we posted" or "You don't really expect us to believe you didn't notice your brother-in-law's violation." Similar to assuming guilt, this type of posture puts you at a disadvantage because people will tend to side with someone who is being insulted.

From, "Ask Questions Well and You May Even Receive Worthwhile Answers!" by Elaine Cogan (PCJ #22)

Don't Become Involved in Altercations

Some persons seem to come to hearings with the express purpose of "telling them guys down there how the cow ate the cabbage." If you answer their irrelevant rantings, you are immediately involved in a fight. Don't answer or try to

defend yourself. You are there to hear testimony and make decisions based thereon, not to head up a debating society.

Remember, you are the judge and the jury. In most cases, it is sufficient to say, "thank you very much for coming here and giving us the benefit of your thinking. I am sure that the members of this body will give your remarks serious consideration."

From, "The Riggins Rules, #21" by Fred Riggins (PCJ #13)

Show Respect

Respect the questioner even when you doubt the question. People ask dumb questions ... hostile ones ... tough ones ... all of which you should answer as directly as you can, but always respectfully. Those three little words, "I don't know," followed up by "but I'll find out for you," should be high in your vocabulary.

From, "You, Too, Can Speak So People Will Listen!" by Elaine Cogan (PCJ #25)

Patience

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.

Patience may be the first attribute you lose when it should be the one you hold on to most tenaciously.

From, "Starting Out the New Year on the Right Foot," by Elaine Cogan (PCJ #8)



ASK QUESTIONS

“The Only Dumb Question ...”

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. A new board member will not (and should not) be chastised for asking basic questions to understand the issue before the board.

From, “The Only Dumb Question ...,” by Stephen DeFeo, Jr. (PCJ #39)

Ask the Right Questions ... and the Hard Ones

Learn to ask the right questions of applicants, staff, and the public -- and don't assume the unstated. If you ask the wrong kinds of questions the answers will be meaningless.

For example, it may be “logical” that a developer would only propose development on safe, stable soil. It seems “logical” that he wouldn't want to risk future problems with development on soil of unknown or unstable characteristics. He may even profess to “value” safe, well-engineered projects. Everyone values safety, surely. But neither issue of “logic” or “value” has anything to do with the reality of whether the

soil is stable or not. Don't take things for granted. Ask the right questions, and make sure of the fact that the soils are indeed stable.

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, “Being a Planning Commissioner,” by Steven R. Burt (PCJ #24)

When In Doubt

One of the responsibilities of the planning commission is to assess the evidence presented. What is often a difficult concept for many commissioners to accept is the fact that you do not have to believe everything that you are told.

If you have doubts about what you are hearing, you can and should ask for better documented information. For



example, if an applicant verbally assures the commission that stormwater management will be taken care of, you may request that the applicant submit an engineering study prepared by a qualified engineer to be made part of the public record.

It is true that if an applicant meets the requirements of the regulations, you must approve the application. However, in reviewing projects, some evaluation of evidence is usually required. Very few codes are entirely quantitative in nature. Indeed, if a set of regulations were entirely quantitative in nature, there would be no need to have a planning commission.

From, “Getting Even,” by Greg Dale (PCJ #26)

TIP #5 FOR NEW COMMISSIONERS

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Before the Meeting

Preparation in advance of the meeting will make you a more effective board member, better suited to serve your community. It is not fair to the applicant, fellow board members, or the community you were sworn to serve to enter the meeting unprepared. Open the plans and read the documents relating to items on the agenda *before* the meeting. Know what the agenda items entail and what action the board is expected to take. But don't worry about being an expert or an authority on the issues before the board.

From, "The Only Dumb Question ...," by Stephen F. DeFeo, Jr. (PCJ #39)

Have you read the agenda packet ahead of time and prepared for the meeting? As you prepare and find you need

additional information, do you ask staff to get it for you?

I'm certainly not saying that you should have all your questions answered and your mind made up before the meeting. However, if staff can gather additional information to assist the process, it will benefit the commission, the staff, and, in many cases, the applicant.

For instance, you may want to refresh your memory regarding a previous similar request. Often locating this type of information requires "digging" in archived files. Staff can either supply the information to you before or at the meeting.

From, "Planning from Different Perspectives," by Carolyn L. Braun (PCJ #24)

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.

From, "The Riggins Rules, #7" by Fred Riggins (PCJ #13)

See the Sites

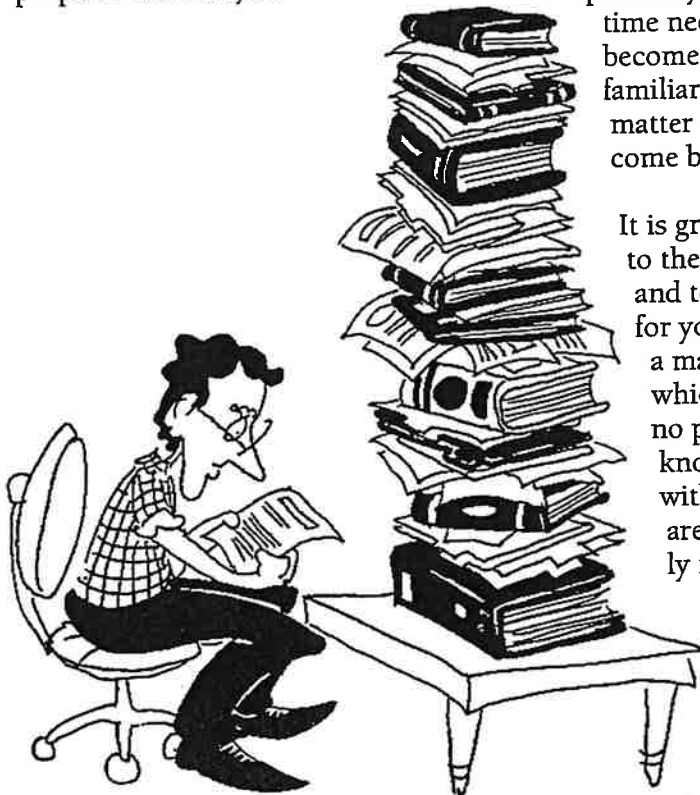
A resident in our town sought a variance of a few feet to erect a garage addition he had planned over a decade ago. Now that he could finally afford to build it, he found that the town had changed the zoning. So he needed a variance.

Had I not gone by the house I wouldn't have known that the footing for the house had been poured long ago.

Unfortunately, one of our board members, who hadn't seen the site, asked "Why can't you just shift the addition a little this way?" -- a remark that I thought would cause the poor applicant to have a cardiac arrest. The color left his face, he went into a sweat, and began stuttering!

While no harm was done -- we granted the variance -- as a board member you should do your best to take a look at the projects you'll be acting on.

From, "Lessons From Nine Years on a Zoning Board," by Douglas C. Hageman (PCJ #3)



TIP #6 FOR NEW COMMISSIONERS

AVOID "EX-PARTE" CONTACTS

"Bending Your Ear"

Consider the following scenario: you are approached by a developer who is considering acquiring a large parcel for development into a major retail facility. He asks if he can "bend your ear" a bit, and gain an understanding of how you might view a zone change on this property to permit the facility. Since he has not yet purchased the property, he requests that you keep his inquiry confidential so as not to inflate the asking price for the property. In the interest of wanting to be helpful, you agree. During the conversation, you indicate your belief that the zone change is a good idea.

... The first mistake made by the planning commissioner in our scenario was to agree to meet with the developer. This meeting would be considered an "ex-parte" contact, meaning that it occurred outside the public realm. ...

The literal meaning of the term "ex-parte" is "one-sided." This, of course, suggests that when you engage in an ex-parte contact, you are engaging in a one-sided discussion, without providing the other side an opportunity to respond and state their case.

Obviously, commissioners can and do have outside contacts with many members of the community, including developers. While such contacts are often appropriate, a line must be drawn when they involve matters which the commission is likely to act on in its capacity

as a review body (e.g., when reviewing development proposals or rezoning requests). Moreover, the fact a contact occurs on a matter that is not yet formally before the commission does not eliminate the problem.

The second mistake was to accept something as confidential information. Planning commissioners are, in fact, public officials. Any public official, including those serving on commissions, should as a general rule consider information provided them to be public information. (Note: I do not mean to include information that the commission, as a body, is legally authorized to treat as confidential -- such as discussion of pending litigation or personnel matters).

If information you obtained through a confidential discussion ends up having relevance to a public matter before the commission, you will have an ethical obligation to disclose it.

The situation described above is different than a situation where you have knowledge about a particular property or development from previous experience through non-confidential sources. As a member of a community you often have relationships or contacts that reveal relevant information. Certainly this cannot be avoided and presents no particular problem as long as you disclose that information for public consideration.

The third, and final, mistake made by the "helpful" commis-

sioner in our hypothetical situation was to give an opinion about the merits of the possible rezoning. A commissioner's credibility is undermined by announcing a position on a matter before the public hearing occurs. Moreover, prejudging matters harms the credibility of the commission as a whole by raising doubts about the integrity of the decision-making process.

From, "Bending Your Ear," by Greg Dale (PCJ #24)

Politely, Say "No"

Don't discuss a case privately and as a single member of a body with an applicant or objector prior to the filing and prior to the hearing if it can be politely avoided.

In the event that it is not avoidable, and many times it is not, be very non-committal, ... explain that you are only one member of the body, that you have not had an opportunity to study the matter thoroughly, that you have not seen the staff recommendation, and that you have no way of knowing what opposition there may develop or what will occur at the public hearing.

Be certain that the person concerned understands that you cannot commit yourself in any manner, except to assure him that he may expect a fair and impartial hearing.

From, "The Riggins Rules, #6" by Fred Riggins (PCJ #13)

RECOGNIZE CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Why Care About Conflicts of Interest?

Conflict of interest questions are part of the larger due process consideration of the impartiality of the planning board or commission. Simply stated, every party before your board is entitled to a fair hearing and decision, free from bias or favor. Having a conflict of interest can threaten that impartiality. Therefore, it is critical that conflicts be identified and dealt with in an appropriate manner.

The issue of conflicts of interest is particularly acute when a planning board member has an interest in developable real estate. While none of us like to think that we have given up some right by agreeing to serve on the planning board, the most sensitive ethical area involves a perception that a planning board member is acting in a way to advance his own interests in private property development.

As a planning commissioner you are a public official. As such your actions are sure to be under scrutiny by members of the public and by your local media. The slightest stumble in how you deal with ethical issues has the potential to flare up into controversy.

When in Doubt, Disclose

If you believe that you have a conflict of interest or a situation that could create the impression of a conflict of interest, the safest route is to dis-

close the nature of your concern to the planning commission. Be sure to make this disclosure *before* beginning discussion of the item.

Let the Commission Decide

Rather than an individual planning commissioner making a unilateral determination on conflict questions, consider establishing a procedure whereby a commissioner may request permission to be excused, or request permission to participate, and let the commission make the determination. This has several effects. First, it removes the burden from the individual. Second, it allows for the possibility that the commission may disagree with the individual commissioner's determination.

Err on the Side of Caution

When faced with a potential conflict, readily agree that you are willing to step aside if the commission so desires. Any insistence on your part to stay involved will only create the impression that you have a reason "to stay involved."

Leave the Room

Once a determination has been made that there is a conflict or potential conflict the simplest course of action is for that commissioner to simply leave the room. Out of sight, out of mind. Continuing to sit silently with the commission or even moving to the audience is not good enough. Leave the room.

An Ounce of Prevention ...

As with many things in life, it makes sense to *plan* for contingencies. Take the time to become familiar with whatever legal restrictions involving conflicts of interest apply in your state. It may benefit your full commission to schedule an informal meeting or workshop with your city or county attorney to discuss hypothetical conflict of interest (and other ethical) concerns and how to deal with them..

From, "Conflicts of Interest - A First Look" and "Caution: Conflicts of Interest," by Greg Dale (PCJ #1 and 34)

Disqualify Yourself

Don't fail to disqualify yourself if either directly or indirectly you have any financial interest in the outcome of the hearing, and let your conscience be your guide where it could be said that moral, ethical, political, or other considerations, such as personal animosity, would not permit you to make a fair and impartial decision. ...

To avoid all accusations of undue influence, it is generally wise to leave the room and ask that the record show that you did so and that you did not indicate by word or action whether you were in favor of, or opposed to, the matter under discussion.

From, "The Riggins Rules, #9" by Fred Riggins (PCJ #13).

TIP #8 FOR NEW COMMISSIONERS

ATTEND ... AND CONTRIBUTE

Be There ... On Time

Don't accept an appointment or nomination to a Board, Commission, or Council unless you expect to attend 99.9999 percent of the regular and special meetings.

If your participation falls below 85 percent during any six months' period, you should tender your resignation. You aren't doing your job. You aren't keeping well enough informed to make intelligent decisions, and you are making other people do your work for you and assume your not inconsiderable responsibility.

Do be on time. If the hearing is scheduled at 7:30, the gavel should descend at the 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 wasted two full working days of someone's time besides creating a very bad beginning for what is a very important occasion for most of those present.

From, "The Riggins Rules, #1 & #3" by Fred Riggins (PCJ #13).

Call In

Serving on a planning commission means having to attend meetings. Just as you would do with your employer, you should call the planning staff or the planning commission chairman if you know you will be unable to attend a commission meeting or be arriving late.

From, "Getting the Job Done" by Michael Chandler (PCJ #19)

You Need to Attend!

Failure to regularly attend meetings can result in a number of problems. It can create poor morale on both the part of staff and fellow commissioners. It can make decisions more difficult to reach -- and can, at times, make it harder to obtain a quorum for doing business.

This is a disservice to applicants, as well as to members of the public, who are entitled to action on a project request. Finally, it can cause resentment on the part of those commissioners who are doing their job, and create a poor public image of the commission.

Many absences are obviously legitimate, and scheduling constraints often make it difficult to both prepare for and attend meetings. But often times the problem is more a reflection of the low priority that the ghost commissioner places on serving on the commission.

From, "The Ghost Commissioner," by Greg Dale (PCJ #6)

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.

From, "Being a Planning Commissioner," by Steven R. Burt (PCJ #24)



TIP #9 FOR NEW COMMISSIONERS

BE INDEPENDENT & INFORMED

The Planning Commission's Role

A central function of a planning commission is to provide an objective, and independent, voice on matters relating to a community's long-term development. This is especially important since local governing bodies are (quite naturally) more sensitive to public opinion and the demands of various special interests.

Planning historian Larry Gerckens has noted that "citizen planning commissioners were put in that position not to execute administrative chores for city council, but to provide insights into the problems and potential of the community, and to provide leadership in the solution of problems before they arise." (see, p. 17)

Moreover, the American Planning Association's "Statement of Ethical Principles in Planning" notes that: "Planning process participants should exercise fair, honest and independent judgment in their roles as decision makers and advisors." (emphasis added)

What are some of the basics to ensuring that a commissioner is well-informed, and capable of exercising his or her independent judgment?

First, be sure to open your meeting packet *before* the meeting! OK, maybe that is too basic, but many commissioners have cringed to hear the sound of a fellow board member tear-

ing the envelope open at the meeting.

If you have a professional staff you should obviously review the staff report carefully. If not, then you should review the application itself. Also, there is no substitute for viewing the subject site and the surrounding area. ... It is also helpful to review the zoning code and comprehensive plan provisions that are relevant to a particular request.

Do not confuse independent judgment with personal bias. The comprehensive plan and the regulations that implement that plan represent the policies and laws that you are bound to uphold, regardless of your own personal biases.

Can one do too much to prepare? Always remember that your decision must ultimately be based upon evidence in the public record. Many commissioners, in their well-placed enthusiasm to be as prepared as possible, engage in independent investigation that involves discussing pending cases before the commission with interested parties to that application. Such ex-parte contacts are improper and should be avoided. See Tip #6.

Another aspect of this issue has to do with the

relationship between the commission and staff. Professional planning staff have the training and ability to provide the commission with valuable information and insights. 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.

From, "Independent and Informed" by Greg Dale (PCJ #36)



Facing Friends and Neighbors

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 anyone. What's a couple of feet in the greater scheme of things?

Similarly, you may be called on to decide applications that have evoked strong neighborhood

opposition. This time, many friends and neighbors may be standing before you. One by one they make impassioned pleas against the proposal. Once again, you are in a difficult position ... how can you approve this request with so many people in opposition? How could this possibly be best for the community? How could all of these people be wrong?

Your staff, though they may empathize with your friends and neighbors, are usually not under the same pressure as you. While both your job and theirs is to review projects to determine whether they comply with the code -- staff members not make the final decision. You do.

It is tempting as a commissioner to simply make a popular decision. It has been my experience, however, that in

the long run, consistent decisions give you more credibility. But rest assured, it won't always be easy.

From, "Planning from Different Perspectives," by Carolyn L. Braun (PCJ #24)

Think It Through

A new member has to do a lot of homework to understand what the whole thing is all about. Also, a new member needs to realize that in meetings there's sometimes pressure from some group to resolve a problem quickly.

I think new members are more likely to feel they have to get this decided, or they'll make an extremely positive statement which they cannot change, or feel they can't change.

It's important to realize that perhaps your first reaction to something may not be the best -- and that you might change your mind as you think it through. I know I've had that experience where something looks pretty good right at the beginning and then as we thought about it, talked about it, and put it over for another month we began to realize what some of the underlying issues were.

From, "A Roundtable Discussion," comments of Carl F.W. Kohn (PCJ #39)



TIP #10 FOR NEW COMMISSIONERS

MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

A Commitment to Excellence

There are fundamentally three types of planning commissioners. The first type thinks they should have some title after their last name and planning commissioner is as good as any. The second type believes in giving public service, prepares well for commission meetings, and participates thoughtfully. The third type of commissioner, however, takes this one step further. Because of a personal commitment to excellence, the third type will make an extra effort to become especially well informed about their community, about planning ideas and techniques, and about ways in which the planning commission can work towards creating a better community.

From, "What Type of Planning Commissioner Will You Be?" by Ron Ames (PCJ #39)

Show Some Passion

We rarely think of passion as a quality of an effective planning commissioner. Passion need not be stubbornness or unwillingness to examine all sides of an issue. It does require, however, that you are willing to speak out or hold out on some matters on which you feel very strongly, even if you are a minority of one.

At least once in your career as a planning commissioner there should be an issue of sufficient importance that you will want to be its champion, regardless of the consequences. On the other hand, do not give the same level of passion or support to every issue, or, like the boy who cried wolf, your colleagues and the community will not be able to recognize those issues that really concern you.

Passionate espousal of your point of view requires that you

honor and respect others who are equally impassioned.

From, "Starting Out the New Year on the Right Foot," by Elaine Cogan (PCJ #8)

Roll Up Your Sleeves

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. ...

Now, as I drive around town and see subdivisions springing up and new businesses coming to town, I like to take my friends or visiting relatives with me, because it's fun to point out the changes I helped to make.

From, "Have a Lot of Fun," by Roberta Peters (PCJ #39)

