

Taking the Planning Commission's Pulse

by Michael Chandler

The start of a new year is usually greeted with a sense of optimism. January is that special month we resolve to do certain things. For many people and many organizations, January represents a fresh start and a new beginning.

The dawn of a new year is also a time of reflection. January presents people and organizations with an opportunity to look back, as well as ahead.

The start of a new year can provide your planning commission with an excellent opportunity to analyze its past performance as a prelude to future actions. Taking the time to engage in constructive introspection and soul-searching will yield dividends. The balance of this column describes one way by which your planning commission can get in touch with itself, in order to prepare for the new year.

AN ORGANIZATIONAL DIAGNOSTIC

A few years ago, while having my car winterized, it struck me that planning commissions might also benefit from an annual "check up." This thought ultimately led to the development of an organizational diagnostic (or exercise) that is regularly used in our Virginia certified planning commissioners training program.

The exercise takes approximately two hours to complete. You will need a facilitator, perhaps your planning director or commission chair. The instructions are minimal: First, each member of the commission should be asked to record his or her response to each question on a sheet of newsprint (using markers). It is best if each answer is on a separate piece of newsprint. After everyone has had time to respond to all ten questions, post (by taping on the wall) the responses to the first question. Then challenge the members to study the various responses for common points. If such points become discernible

— and they probably will — ask them to try to develop a consensus response for that question. Then move on to the next question. After the exercise has been completed, it's useful to prepare a summary report.

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Over the years, the exercise has proven to be both popular and powerful. Not only does it help a commission clarify its role, but, in working through the questions, commissioners see that they can achieve consensus among themselves. This, in turn, helps foster a spirit of cohesiveness and unity.

The questions appearing on the organizational diagnostic are as follows:

1. *Why do we exist?* This is a fundamental question. The planning commission should be challenged to identify reasons beyond just citing state or local codes which mandate that there be a commission.

2. *What business are we in?* Yes, the question reads business. The idea is to get the commission to identify attributes that underscore its function.

3. *What is our product?* This question is intended to get the commission to identify its end result(s).

4. *Who are our clients?* Who does the commission serve? This question often generates much discussion.

5. *What kind of image do we project in the community?* This question may prove difficult for some commissions to respond to,

but it is designed to get commissions thinking about their role in the community.

6. *What do we do well as a commission (strengths)?* The goal is to reach some consensus about the things the commission does well.

7. *What do we do poorly as a commission (weaknesses)?* Conversely, this question is intended to identify the commission's shortcomings.

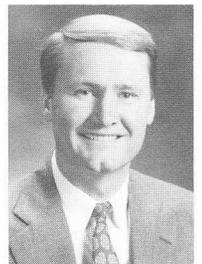
8. *What are the commission's goals? Are they written down?*

9. *How is your community different because of the planning commission?* Fundamentally, this question asks the commission to document the difference it is making or identify the reasons why it is not making a difference in the community.

10. *What would be lost if the commission ceased to exist?* Perhaps the most thought-provoking question for the commission to focus on.

Successful organizations know where they are and where they are headed. By investing time to ask baseline questions, a planning commission can position itself to be a relevant and respected player in the land use planning process. ♦

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[Editor's Note: We hope that some of you will try out this exercise. If you do, please let us know how it went — and, if possible, send us a copy of your summary report. Mike Chandler is especially interested to see how your results compare to those he has gotten.]