

Planning Commissioners Roundtable Discussion

Wayne Senville (Editor, *PCJ*): Good morning. Maybe a good way to start would be if each of you briefly describes where you're from, and how long you've been a planning commissioner.

Mary Welch: I'm from Yachats ("ya-hots"), known as "the gem of the Oregon coast," a resort city along the central Oregon coast. We are a quiet resort city of 635 homes, 11 resort motels, 9 bed & breakfasts, 9 restaurants and many rental houses. There exist well over 100 home occupations. Tourism is the base of our economy and room tax comprises the majority of the city's general fund. Soon the whale star of the film "Free Willy" will reside at a nearby coastal aquarium which will attract more visitors. I'm the most senior planning commissioner, having served over four-and-a-half years.

Valerie Kretchmer: I'm from Evanston, Illinois. I've been on the planning commission here for three years. Evanston is the first suburb north of Chicago, along Lake Michigan. We've got 73,000 people. Evanston's a mature community, but has an interesting mix of people because we're home to Northwestern University. We have a very diverse population racially. We have low-income, very high-income, and a significant middle-income population, so we're dealing with some of the urban ills that plague some older cities, but we're also a suburb.

Jane Williams: I'm from Lakewood, Colorado, and I've been on the planning commission for about seven months. Lakewood is a western suburb of Denver, started about 25 years ago. Our population is about 130,000. We have lots of areas that are still very rural. We have large tracts of undeveloped land being used for pasture or left vacant, so in the center of some densely populated areas you've suddenly got horses and coyotes. It's a real interesting mix of land uses.

[Editor's Note: The following are edited excerpts from a telephone conference call / roundtable discussion held on December 16, 1994. The volunteers for this experiment in cross-country, inter-commission dialogue were: Mary Welch of Yachats, Oregon; Valerie Kretchmer of Evanston, Illinois; Jane Williams of Lakewood, Colorado; and Doug Cook of Blair, Nebraska. As Editor of the PCJ, and as a planning commissioner myself, I found the discussion very informative, and, at times, quite entertaining (alas, because of space limitations, a good portion of the banter has been edited out). If you might be interested in participating in a future roundtable discussion, please drop us a line].



Mary Welch



Valerie Kretchmer



Jane Williams



Doug Cook

Doug Cook: I'm in Blair, Nebraska, about 45 minutes northwest of Omaha. I've been on our city planning commission for one year and have an interesting role because I'm also the planning administrator for the county as my day job. Blair is a town of about 7,000 people. Because we are so close to Omaha and the access is so good,

we are growing like crazy as a bedroom community. But we also have industry that's finding Blair attractive because we are along the Missouri River. Property in the City of Blair and Washington County is in demand these days, and it's an exciting time here in this part of Nebraska.

Wayne Senville: Perhaps each of you could take a minute to describe the one or two most significant issues facing your community and your planning commission.

Mary Welch: Significant challenges facing our planning commission are the balancing of the governing comprehensive plan and ordinances which complement the natural beauty of our location with the sensitivity of property owners' wishes. The lucrative timber market is baring the ridges abutting our narrow coastal plain and at the same time creating new economic activity in land partitions and developments. Building sites will increase over thirty percent this year.

Jane Williams: We're facing significant growth, especially along the Front Range — the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains. We can feel the impact on everything. Huge increases in traffic volume, and, of course, that's exacerbated by limitations from the Clean Air Act and the regional efforts to meet air quality standards.

Growth has had a significant impact on Lakewood's neighborhoods. We have large tracts of undeveloped land, and people are wanting to preserve them, and preserve the neighborhood identity. But then there's always the question of property rights, and what rights people have to be able to move into this area.

Valerie Kretchmer: Evanston, because it's a mature suburb, doesn't have land for additional expansion. One of the key issues facing us is the balance between economic development — what the city

should do to encourage redevelopment and expand its tax base — and not feeling like we're giving away the store to people who come and say: "We want to develop here."

Right now we're in the throes of some redevelopment projects. One is in our downtown, where a major employer decided to leave for more open, greener pastures. We've also just had the redevelopment of two industrial sites into big box power retail centers, which proves to be a mixed blessing. We welcome the opportunity to have some of those retailers here, but we do have a very vibrant downtown and people are concerned about what it means when you get some of those larger big boxes into your community.

The other big issue facing our planning commission involves our zoning ordinance which was redone after many years of public hearings and discussion. As a result, we've been faced with a lot of requests for map amendments, text amendments, that sort of thing.

Doug Cook: Because Blair is a small Nebraska town, I guess we're in a little different position than Valerie described for Evanston. Now our problem is how to deal with new economic development because for years and years this was a very sleepy, quiet, do-business-by-the-handshake kind of town — and it isn't that way anymore. A lot of people are being dragged into this new situation kicking and screaming. It's very, very busy here, but I can't help wonder if we're prepared for all the development activity.

Our big issues involve dealing with what I'd call the "urban-rural interface" — how to decide what size lots go where and where do you put the people. Because of that, the city is going out for bids to update our comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance. Now Valerie just scared me when she said Evanston spent years on this.

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TERM FUTURE.

Valerie Kretchmer: Yes, it's taken us a long time.

Mary Welch: It took almost three years to update our comprehensive plan. We are currently updating our ordinances.

Wayne Senville: What sort of role do each of you see your planning commission having in terms of leading the discussion of growth and development issues? Or is your commission basically reactive?

Jane Williams: I think we *are* a planning commission. And I think that we should be proactive. I feel that we have the responsibility to be well informed about current issues, as well as issues that are going to affect us in the near future — and in the long-term future. Of course, we certainly are limited as to some things that we can do, and we can't get involved in development issues that come before us — having to be impartial and having to make our decisions based on what we receive in public hearings and public information.

Valerie Kretchmer: Our planning commission does tend to be somewhat reactive, in part because of our new zoning ordinance. We've been forced to spend a lot of time over the last year reacting to things.

But we also try to be proactive. For example, our planning department, with a

lot of planning commission input, is embarking on a neighborhood planning effort — to try to understand what the needs of individual neighborhoods are, and how we can plan more effectively for them, so that we're not just reacting to a proposal from a developer who wants to put something in.

Our city council is really the main body that sets policy for the community, and it has a planning & development committee. Very often they will refer things to the planning commission for review and to develop policies. We then deliberate, make a recommendation, and, I would say in better than half the cases, the aldermen then vote against what the planning commission has recommended!

Doug Cook: We spend a lot of time on plats and rezones, and things like that. But I think the fact that the city is going out for bids to update its comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance, that we are going to be more ahead of the ballgame.

Mary Welch: The planning commission has the role of determining the actual "what" cities do for their people. Oregon law has two major components. One aspect defines what land may be used for. The other focuses on processes to make land use decisions.

We have a diverse group of people representing planning: developers, remodelers, lodging owners, real estate agents, and private citizens like myself. The state has recently decided to promote the uniqueness of the coast, and the additional visitors are impacting coastal communities.

Wayne Senville: Are there things your commissions have done to encourage good communications with the public and with the different interest groups in the community? Any particular techniques or strategies?

Jane Williams: Lakewood has worked

continued on page 6

Rountable Discussion

continued from page 5

hard on trying to foster good communications with the public. We have a neighborhood planning program. While this kind of program has limited resources, our city council has endorsed the fact that neighborhood planning is needed.

We are just wrapping up one neighborhood effort in which about 85 or so citizens worked for over a year with numerous workshops and discussion sessions, talking about their neighborhood, which happens to have a lot of these large tracts of undeveloped land. Lots of questions were raised about future development. What they have come up with is a neighborhood plan that's managed to capture the desires of the residents and translate those desires into future goals. So in the next few months they're going to be bringing this to the planning commission and then to city council to incorporate into the comprehensive plan.

One other thing that we are looking at is setting up a "Citizens Planning Academy." It would be based on a very successful program we've had in Lakewood called the "Citizens Police Academy." That's a 9 or 10-week program where people have intensive training one night a week in all aspects of a policeman's job. It's been extremely successful. What we are talking about in the planning department is having something similar for planning — getting key neighborhood people and giving them the opportunity to learn about the zoning stages, the building permits, getting some hands-on work on mapping and planning, and just learning about the processes, as well as the dilemmas.

Wayne Senville: That's an intriguing idea. You'll have to keep us posted on how that works out.

Mary Welch: The public has always been permitted to provide points of view, both written and verbal. Education is vital for commissioners, and attendance at seminars is offered. I take it upon myself to listen at meetings of interest groups in the community.

Doug Cook: We have no neighborhood plan. The planning commission meets

once a month. We do have a state planning conference every year. It's a mini version of the American Planning Association national conference, and is an excellent resource.

Wayne Senville: For all of you, do you have much turnover on your commissions? Two of you said you were relatively new.

Valerie Kretchmer: Our commission terms are three years, and you're allowed to serve only two terms. So typically there is always some turnover. But I would say probably half of the people choose to serve two terms.

PEOPLE COME TO OUR MEETINGS WITH THEIR ATTORNEY AND SAY, "GIVE ME THIS OR WE WILL SUE." IT'S CHEAPER FOR THE CITY TO SETTLE, EVEN IF THE CITY IS RIGHT, RATHER THAN PAY LEGAL FEES.

Jane Williams: There are seven of us. We go the full spectrum. While I am the most recent member to come on board this past summer, we have a commissioner who has been on for, I believe, about 18 years. Just recently we had term limitations kick in — two terms of four years each — so there are several people now on their last term. There are three of us who have been on the planning commission for less than a year and a half.

Mary Welch: Our present planning commission is the most lasting of recent years. Turnover has normally been every nine months.

Doug Cook: We have nine people on our commission. We turn over maybe one person a year, so we're fairly stable.

Wayne Senville: I'm curious about how you deal with new commissioners. When someone comes on board, do they just show up at their first meeting and get started?

Valerie Kretchmer: The answer is yes. You just come in and start working the very first day.

Mary Welch: Yes, although since I've been reading the Planning Commissioners Journal I've been trying to push that there are other things that we can do.

Doug Cook: You're appointed, receive copies of the comp plan, subdivision regulations and zoning ordinance, and get into it.

Wayne Senville: Has being on the planning commission changed your viewpoints in any way?

Mary Welch: I applied to be on the planning commission because I wanted to make my community a better community. I had worked with an urban renewal program and thought that was a good qualification. I thought that in a small city laws would be more equally applied. I have also found out it is very difficult to make changes. Also, the same issues keep coming up that I thought were settled once and for all.

Valerie Kretchmer: I've certainly learned a lot more about the city that I live in, and probably have a greater appreciation of the diversity of the community and the issues that we face. I also have come to realize very much what the limitations of the planning commission are. Particularly, I think, in a lot of situations where the council has overturned the recommendations of our commission.

Doug Cook: We're a little more fortunate than you, Valerie. Our city council is extremely reluctant to overturn any of our recommendations. We had a very controversial item, we had 20 people here the other night. I thought when it went to city council they would overrule us. Instead, they agreed with our recommendations unanimously. So our hearings, I feel, are very important. We're fortunate in that regard.

Jane Williams: Well, I guess I've always known that the closer you look at anything, the more complicated it becomes. I don't know how much it has changed my viewpoint on things. I love the involvement — and I've got to admit that it's real

addictive for me. I like going to the city council meetings and hearing how they deal with our actions — you know, after we've approved or denied something. But I have gained a great deal of respect for the people in the planning department, the staff, for the work that they do and the efforts they put into it.

If my viewpoint has changed on anything, or if I've been surprised by anything, it's the responsiveness that people have had to the planning commission. The developers, after they have come out of our meetings and before going to city council, make efforts to improve their plans — and try to incorporate our ideas and thoughts into what they're trying to do before they take it on to city council.

I've also been impressed with our council's responsiveness to the commission's concerns and ideas. When we have sat down to talk to them, they have been very respectful of the concerns that we have and the direction that we want to move.

Doug Cook: Wayne, before you ask your next question, I'd like to ask everyone what their biggest frustration as a planning commission member has been.

Wayne Senville: Good question. Doug, why don't you start off by telling us what's been most frustrating to you.

Doug Cook: My biggest frustration is that I cannot get the other eight members of our commission to talk. I will sit there at a meeting, and the chairman introduces the item and asks for comments from the floor. Then he asks for comments from the commission and nobody says anything. That's the biggest frustration, to get more communication among the commission itself.

Wayne Senville: That's interesting. Here in Burlington the problem's just the opposite. We often can't get commissioners to quit talking!

Jane Williams: Doug, do you guys ever just sit down and talk among yourselves?

Doug Cook: After the meeting we have great conversations. But I'd like to have those during the public meeting as well.

Valerie Kretchmer: What I find frustrat-

ing is when somebody comes in for, say, some kind of a zoning change, and we are only allowed to consider the evidence that is brought before us at the meeting. In some cases people may not even show up to comment on something. As a result, you're forced to make a decision based on what has been presented to you, as opposed to what you may already know.

Mary Welch: People come to our meetings with their attorney and say, "Give me this or we will sue." It's cheaper for the city to settle, even if the city is right, rather than pay legal fees. So people actually are making money with their attorneys in our town, and it's sad because we're getting developments now, and at every meeting we have attorneys sit here with us saying, "You will do this. You will give it to us."

Jane Williams: One thing that frustrates me happens when we hold public hearings on zoning changes and replattings. We get a lot of citizens at these public hearings, and they come with lots and lots of questions. But to be able to answer all their questions, we would have to step out of our purview. So we get reigned back in by our chairman saying, "Well, you can't ask that. You can't probe into that." Yet he, also, feels silenced. If you've got a room full of citizens and they have all these concerns and questions, but you're limited as to what you can ask — I find that incredibly frustrating.

Wayne Senville: Since you all just described what you've found most frustrating, let's end our conversation on a positive note by my asking what you've found to be the most rewarding part of being a planning commissioner. Hopefully, none of you are going to say financially rewarding!

Mary Welch: For me it would be the fact that I'm learning about land issues, and I'm meeting the people in my community.

Valerie Kretchmer: It's getting a better understanding of the issues of the community. As someone who does consulting work, I find it an interesting opportunity to be on the inside of the municipality and get a feel for how some of the decisions are made, get a little broader background on

some zoning and planning matters that I don't deal with on a day-to-day basis professionally.

Jane Williams: I've never done anything in planning or in growth before, and I just love learning about these issues.

Doug Cook: Ever since I've been in college, I've wanted to be involved in my community. And, frankly, for me it's rewarding knowing that I'm a part of the growth of the city. I look forward to meetings. I just enjoy being a part of the whole process. ♦