

# How Broad is Your Planning Horizon?

by Elaine Cogan

There probably is not a community in this land that has erected a statue in honor of a planning commissioner! Mayors, yes; and untold numbers of war heroes. But people, such as yourself, who devote hours of earnest effort to keeping your communities livable and unique, often go unnoticed.

You may not mind, for with notice comes notoriety, and with the mood of today's voracious media, sometimes too much prying into personal affairs. Still, when you finish your term of office on the planning board, for what would you like to be remembered? You are setting your sights too low if all you can take credit for is a particular subsection in the zoning code. Think again. You take part in some of the most important decisions a community can make and have the opportunity to help broaden its horizons and aspirations, even in the midst of the tough, day-to-day decisions that must be made.

One of the best ways to do this is never to lose sight of the fact that you have another life (though you may wonder sometimes after an interminable zoning hearing). Conflict of interest laws protect the community from flagrant misuse of power or position, but they should not be misinterpreted to mean that we ignore all we know or who we are.

If you are a school teacher or administrator, for example, you know better than most how children will be affected by planning decisions about sites for educational facilities, or public works proposals to widen a road near a neighborhood park. If you are a banker, you understand how important it is to be able to find the means to pay for the dreams the community may want. Social workers have insights into the needs of those who may be under-represented in the community. Business people have informed opinions about the effect of a proposed "big box" development on local merchants.

These insights, expressed openly and honestly, give an added dimension to everyone's decision-making. Balance, of course, is the key, and it is important that you not judge everything solely from your personal experience.

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Being a planning commissioner should also enhance your knowledge, and give you valuable perspectives on many issues. Legal prohibitions to discussing cases with people outside the framework of the hearings process exist for good reasons. But they should not inhibit you from talking about planning principles or issues that have already been settled. At the local service club meeting, some of your friends and neighbors may complain that "those guys down at city hall are doing it again — sneaking in those new yard setbacks when we weren't looking." You know better. You sat through hours of public hearings before reaching what you thought was a good compromise. This is your chance to give less-informed people who know and trust you facts they might not have otherwise.

Have you ever had lunch with your local newspaper editor, school superintendent, or head of the chamber of commerce? Do you know the leaders of local minority or ethnic populations, and are they comfortable calling you on the phone

when there is a planning situation that concerns them? When, if ever, have you been to a local neighborhood group meeting just to listen?

If you take the time to meet people outside your own circle, you will widen the knowledge and understanding you bring to the decisions of the planning board. Staff also should be encouraged to get out to neighborhood or service club meetings.

The least credible planning board meetings are those where the public cannot tell the commissioners from the planning staff. They use the same jargon and sit at the same table, huddling among themselves, treating everyone else as an outsider. The best planning boards are those where there is collaborative but dynamic tension. Commissioners acknowledge their role as laypeople and decision-makers by sitting apart from staff and are not reluctant to question technical findings and bring their "real world" concerns into the board room.

As we have explored in other columns, it is important always to express yourself constructively. Do not challenge or embarrass planning staff in public. Do your homework and know the facts before voicing your opinions. Respect your fellow commissioners and their right to disagree with you. All these rules of polite and cordial behavior help you to play an effective role as the bridge between a less-informed public and the sometimes puzzling and esoteric world of planning. ♦

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