

Getting the Job Done

by Michael Chandler

I recall the scene to this day. I had just been appointed to the Blacksburg Planning Commission. After a few congratulatory comments, the commission chairman told me that I would encounter few problems if I viewed my time on the commission as a job — something that requires an unqualified commitment of time and energy in order to get something done. That was among the best advice I received about serving on a planning commission.

Being a planning commissioner does indeed require time and energy. And in this regard it is akin to having a job. For some commissioners the time commitment is minimal; no more than an hour or two a week. For others, the time commitment is much greater. In fact, for some planning commissioners time is counted in days rather than hours.

The balance of this article will highlight strategies planning boards can employ to help commissioners get the job done.

BEFORE THE MEETING

Instinct, as well as experience, tell us that most events — such as a trip or a fine meal — are the result of proper planning and preparation. Successful planning commissions are no different. Minus preparation, the work produced by a planning commission will likely be second rate. When this happens the community suffers.

There are some relatively simple steps that can help ensure that planning commissioners are prepared for their job. The first involves making sure each commission member receives a copy of the meeting agenda, as well as any and all background reports, maps, and studies, several days in advance of the scheduled commission meeting.

The next step is related to the first. Have a member of the planning staff (or the planning commission chairman) call around to every member of the commission

to make sure they received the information packet. This call can serve several purposes in addition to the obvious one of ensuring that the packet was, in fact, received. For one, the phone call acts as a gentle reminder to commission members to do their homework in advance of the scheduled commission meeting.

Even more importantly, the call allows individual commissioners to ask questions they may have about the information. This can give staff the chance to research answers to commissioners' questions in advance of the meeting. While this will not (and should not) eliminate the need for commissioners to actively question items during the meeting, it will enable the commission to act more expeditiously on agenda items, and reduce the need to delay action.

Another important aspect of pre-meeting preparation involves visiting the sites or properties that will be on the agenda. For important or controversial projects formal site visits, with staff, applicants, and neighbors participating, can be quite valuable. While formal site visits may not be necessary for more "routine" projects it makes sense for commissioners to try to be as familiar with the site — in advance of the meeting — as possible, even if it just means driving by the site and taking a quick look around.

DURING THE MEETING

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.

The work of the commission will be made easier if rules of procedure are utilized. The rules perform a vital function in that they outline how the commission will handle its business. Time limits for speakers, managing the agenda, and procedures

for deferring business are some of the issues covered in rules of procedure. Many commissions will include a statement of rules in their by-laws.

AFTER THE MEETING

Before the commission chairman gavel the meeting to a close, it is important to determine whether any actions taken by the commission will require attention before the next regularly scheduled commission meeting. If so, assignments of responsibility should be made.

As I suggested in a previous column, it is also quite valuable to allocate time periodically to "debrief" your meetings. This allows all commissioners the chance to discuss whether meetings are being conducted as effectively as possible. [See "Making the Most of Your Meeting Time: Part II" in PCJ #16].

Also, be sure that draft copies of the meeting minutes are prepared promptly and distributed before the next regular commission meeting. Don't let a backlog of minutes accumulate.

Finally, remember that getting the job done means working together. Businesses have increasingly realized the importance of a team approach to effective performance. Planning commissions whose members respect and help each other stand the best chance of getting the job done, and serving their community most effectively. ♦

Michael Chandler is an Associate Professor and Community Planning Extension Specialist at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. Mike also regularly conducts planning commissioner training programs. His column appears in each issue of the Planning Commissioners Journal.

