

Working Effectively With Elected Officials

by Elaine Cogan

How often have you made a particularly difficult decision as a planning commissioner but then left the room relieved that any angry people you failed to placate can appeal to the governing body?

Most communities give that recourse to citizens and it is generally a good idea. As an appointee, you do not have the same responsibility to the electorate as your community's elected body.

However, you are not doing your proper job as an appointed official if most of your commission's opinions are appealed, and especially, if a majority of your rulings are subsequently overturned. If that happens often, you may think you are taking the high road and the elected officials are merely pandering to the voters, but it also may be a signal that you and your fellow commissioners are out of step or have not done all you could to lobby for your points of view.

Building bridges through effective advocacy is an aspect of your job that is often overlooked.

In small communities, where everyone knows everyone else and the positions on the various boards and commissions — and even membership on the governing body — may, in effect, rotate among public-spirited citizens, relationships are informal and it is easy to have access to the elected decision-makers. Still, other than in formal meetings, many planning board members are reluctant to speak up for their points of view, and thus may lose the opportunity to forge valuable alliances.

In larger communities, planning commissioners may be appointed by the mayor and not even be known to other elected officials. Staff has a stronger role than in smaller areas in carrying out the planning agenda, especially in dealing with other departments such as transportation or public works. However, that should not relieve planning commissioners of their

advocacy responsibilities.

In any community, there are steps you can take to at least make sure planning commission aims and policies are clear to the elected body, with the long-range goal of mutual understanding and support.

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• *Attend your governing body's meeting when an appeal of one of your decisions is being considered.* It may not be pleasant to hear people disagree with you, but the experience will give you some sense of the depth of feeling of elected officials, and the public, on specific issues. If the commission's findings often are overturned because of form or content, you may want to review them with your staff; if the findings are okay but the governing body disagrees with your conclusions, it is still appropriate to revisit the issue informally to see why you are out of step. You may want to try again with a different approach.

• *Be acquainted with the political platforms of the members of the governing body.* Did someone campaign for office promising to end all planning as you know it? That is a clue to how that individual may respond to particular issues. You still should not give up. You or other commissioners should arrange a visit to explain your position and the positive results planning has on your community — and also listen to the elected official's contrary ideas.

• *Do not rely entirely on staff to convey your message.* In most cases, reliance on your professional staff is a satisfactory way to carry out your commission's planning objectives. But if there are certain planning issues on which you feel very strongly, you may be the best one to express it — and it should be to the appropriate elected official, not staff.

• *Enlist the help of the media.* Used sparingly, letters to the editor or "op-ed" or opinion pieces in the local newspaper can be effective in espousing a planning commission point of view that you believe is being maligned or misunderstood. It is better that this be from the entire commission rather than one individual who can be dismissed as a maverick. The objective should be to encourage constructive dialogue, not start a war of words.

• *Suggest a retreat or informal workshop* among planning commission members and elected officials to try to come to consensus on a common vision, goals and objectives. Even if the best you can do is agree to disagree, you will have heard each other and learned something.

The relationship between the elected official and appointed boards such as the planning commission should always be cordial, even in the heat of battle. You can do a great deal to make it so. ♦

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