


# The Planning Commission As Independent Advisor

by Michael Chandler

A planning commission does not exist or function in isolation. In this column, I want to focus on the relationship or “linkage” between the commission and local governing body.

Ever since the nation’s first planning commission was appointed by the Hartford, Connecticut, City Council in 1907, planning commissions have served as independent *advisors* to their local governing body on planning and land use matters. A key word in the preceding sentence is advisors.  *The Standard Planning Enabling Act*. Keeping this in mind is important when considering a planning commission’s relationship to the governing body.

The planning commission’s principal function is to prepare and update the comprehensive plan (also called the general or master plan). The planning commission is also typically responsible for recommending amendments to zoning and subdivision ordinances. Finally, planning commissions often make recommendations to the governing body on development proposals, though in many states commissions take final action subject only to court appeal.

Not having the final word can be a difficult thing — especially when the commission expends great amounts of time and energy only to have its advice rejected by the governing body (though, hopefully, this will not happen too often). Don’t let this discourage you. Instead, look for ways your commission can advance the cause of good planning, and strengthen its relationship with the governing body.

Remember that as a planning commissioner you’re responsible for focusing on the long-term. Most elected officials appreciate this forward thinking role because it allows them to gauge the public’s receptivity to future courses of action.

Planning commissions can also strengthen their role by involving the public as much as possible — especially in

work on the municipal plan. It is amazing how receptive the governing body will be to the planning commission’s recommendations when they’re supported by a hundred members of the public!

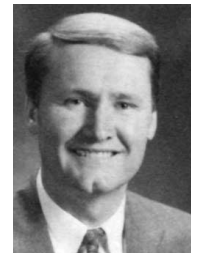
Try to develop a partnership between the commission and the governing body. One way is to hold joint work sessions or public hearings on major planning issues and initiatives. While in many states it is not uncommon for the two bodies to hold joint public hearings (often required by statute or ordinance), it has been my experience that the same is not true of informal work sessions. Yet such work sessions can yield a greater appreciation and understanding of each body’s role — and promote a shared planning agenda that considers the municipality’s near and long-term needs.

Monitoring the consistency of planning commission recommendations and governing body action with your local land use plan represents another opportunity. Some commissions prepare an annual report on

the status of planning in the community. Once prepared, the report is shared with the governing body, and with the community at large. Such a report can serve as an important barometer measuring the difference planning is making in the community.

Finally, consider opening other lines of communication with your elected officials. This might involve presenting planning commission reports during governing body meetings, making sure elected officials occasionally attend commission meetings, and, if appropriate, having an elected official serve as a liaison member to the commission. ♦

*Michael Chandler is an Associate Professor and Community Planning Extension Specialist at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg. Mike also conducts training programs across the country, and is a frequent speaker at workshops. He has served on the Blacksburg Planning Commission and, for the past 12 years, on the Town Council.*



## The Standard Planning Enabling Act

The SPEA, prepared in 1928 by the U.S. Department of Commerce under then Secretary Herbert Hoover — and subsequently adopted (with generally minor modifications) by nearly every state — envisioned: “a clearly defined permanent planning branch in the local government, in the form of a commission which formulates a comprehensive plan and keeps it up to date. The commission then *advises* the legislative and executive branches of the municipality, and the public, as to the importance of the plan and promotes conformance to it in the laying out of new streets, the construction of

public works and utilities, and the private development of land.” (emphasis added). *From the Hoover Advisory Committee Report.* In some states, the planning commission adopts the plan; in others, the commission recommends the plan to the governing body for adoption; while a third approach is to have the plan subject to public referendum.

Note that planning enabling acts are separate from zoning and subdivision enabling acts. The latter give municipalities the power to adopt zoning or subdivision regulations. In a number of states, planning commissions exercise final authority — subject to court appeal — over certain development applications, often as part of a site plan or subdivision review.