

Why Don't Planning Commissioners Get the Respect They Deserve?

by Elaine Cogan

It sometimes seems that planning commissioners are the Rodney Dangerfields of local government. They get little respect and scant recognition for the work they do to preserve and improve their communities. Instead of being honored as heroes and heroines, they may be disparaged and reviled.

Planning is no longer associated with being a communist plot, but still, it is suspect by many people, possibly with good reason. There are few places in local government where citizens actually interact with bureaucrats on issues that are of primary concern to them — what they can do with their dwelling places or businesses.

Yes, people can be rude and unappreciative, but misunderstandings are rarely completely one-sided. Changes in your behavior can go a long way to engendering civility and respect.

Respect comes, not from softening or giving in on a position you hold sincerely, but from understanding how to communicate what often is bad news. It starts at the planning department counter and ends at the planning commission meeting room. It includes everyone who has any dealing with citizens.

It might be enlightening to enter the planning office, looking at it as an applicant. Does the environment make you feel like a respected citizen or more like a supplicant pleading against the system? Are people greeted promptly and courteously? How high is the counter? This may seem insignificant, but too many planning offices create physical barriers that make average citizens with even the most routine matters uncomfortable.

Have you looked at your zoning ordinance or comprehensive plan lately? Remove your planning commissioner's knowing spectacles and try to read it with the uncomprehending eye of the citizen

who merely wants to enlarge his driveway or change the sign on her small retail business. Local codes often are written in highly technical or arcane language, and are difficult for many citizens to understand.

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Naturally, the interpreter of the code — first the staff, and then often the planning commission — can appear to be the enemy, especially if they use planning jargon to explain why citizens cannot do what they may think they have the right to do.

What about those big subdivision maps and wordy ordinances written in the smallest possible type? Builders and developers may understand them, but they are likely to create even more fears and anxieties in most people. Has anyone taken the time to rewrite at least the most often used sections of the code so that they can be understood by citizens who do not deal

with these matters on a regular basis? Do planners speak jargon or “plain English”? Is there at least one person in the office who knows a foreign language if this is prevalent in your community?

Take the same outsider's look at your planning commission meeting. Do you show respect for citizens by dealing with controversial matters early on so people can express their opinions and then go home rather than wait impatiently for you to go through a lengthy and unclear agenda?

Is the area where you sit elevated? If so, it gives a clear signal that you consider yourselves more important and separate from the rest of the citizenry. Do you listen politely to people who may not agree with you — other commissioners and the public at large — or fold your hands, scowl, doodle, or otherwise show your lack of respect for them and their opinions?

Planning at its best can help a community be its best, and planning commissioners are key players. Short of organizing a planning commissioners support group where you can air your gripes and concerns, you should learn how to cope with all “those out there” who appear to give you so much trouble. Respect is earned, the hard way, from small and consistent actions. Even Rodney Dangerfield would admit that. ♦

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