

# Video-Conference Training for Planning Commissioners

by Kathleen McMahon, AICP

What do Captain Kirk, George Jetson, and the Sheridan, Wyoming, Planning Commission have in common? All have used two way video-conferencing technologies to interact with colleagues at remote locations.

Providing planning commission training is always a challenge. Often training is limited to digesting a stack of planning documents before being served to a room full of angry citizens. Staff, overwhelmed with agenda items, has little time to conduct training. While state and national planning workshops are available, funds for planning commissioner travel are scarce. Video-conferencing offers an option to overcome these obstacles.

Although 477 miles separate the Wyoming towns of Sheridan and Evanston, video-conferencing enabled citizen planners from both communities (and several more) to receive training from two of the top land use attorneys in the country — without leaving town. For most participants, this opportunity would not have been possible without the cost sharing benefits and convenience offered by the video-conference format.

Video-conferencing allows training to be broadcast from one site to one or more other sites. Participants at remote sites watch the broadcast over a television monitor. They can use a microphone to ask questions of the trainer. The trainer at the originating site, as well as individual participants at any of the sites, can see and interact with whoever is asking the question. The Wyoming planning commissioner video-conference mentioned above, involved citizen planners participating interactively from eight separate sites located across the state.

By broadcasting to multiple sites, video-conferencing maximizes training

*Editor's Note: Educating citizens and commissioners about planning issues is vital. In this article, Kathleen McMahon will familiarize you with how video-conferencing technology offers an effective, relatively low-cost approach to training. After you read Kathleen McMahon's article, take a look at Mike Chandler's column (on page 14). Chandler focuses on another relatively new approach to training: the citizen planning academy.*

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resources. Multiple agencies can share the cost of speaker fees and equipment rental. Bringing a nationally renowned speaker would be cost prohibitive for most communities. Video technology makes training affordable.

The cost to rent the equipment for the Wyoming planning commissioner video-conference averaged \$10 for each participant. For a traditional conference, mileage costs alone may range from \$50 to \$200 per person. Add in the savings in travel time and possible overnight accommodations and the cost advantages of video-conferencing become more evident.

Eliminating travel time and costs allows more commissioners to take advantage of a single training event. Additionally, the workshop can easily be taped for use in training of future commissioners.

## ORGANIZING A VIDEO-CONFERENCE

Organizing a video-conference is not difficult, though a minimum of three to six months lead-time will probably be necessary. It is advisable first to contact planning agencies to assess their interest in participating in the training. There should be an ample number of agencies to share costs. A preliminary budget will indicate if the training is affordable for most agencies.

The two main costs typically are for equipment rental and speaker fees. Most video-conference equipment is rented on an hourly basis plus a charge for each site participating in the conference. In order to make the training more affordable, communities may want to find a sponsor for the conference to underwrite some of the costs.

Wyoming planning commissioners had the following tips for a successful video-conference:

- Distribute handouts in advance so all sites can follow along with the trainer.
- Begin the conference with a roll call of each remote site. Check to make sure all sites are on-line and all equipment is functioning.
- Take time to explain the operation of the conference. This is important since video-conferencing will be new to most participants. Explain how to ask questions, when breaks will occur, and what to do in event of equipment failure. Make sure everyone has phone numbers for the broadcast site and remote sites.
- It is more difficult to maintain audience interest at remote sites where the speaker is not physically present. Involve all sites by allowing for questions and interaction at regular intervals.
- Another way to maintain interest is to alternate between speakers for long presentations, and to make use of overheads. Overheads that are broadcast need to be relatively simple. A few lines of text

and large type are recommended to make the information readable.

- A few extended breaks are better than frequent short breaks. Frequent breaks consume too much time getting participants seated and ready to resume the workshop.

- Due to heavy demand and charges for the equipment, video-conferences follow a rigid schedule. The workshop will probably not be able to extend past the scheduled time. Maintain a strict timetable and allow plenty of time for questions.

- Provide evaluation forms so participants can provide suggestions for successful future conferences.

### SUMMING UP:

In the past, planning commissioner training may have seemed a luxury. Today, video-conferencing technology has made high quality training an affordable option for planning commissions across the country. ♦

Kathleen McMahon, AICP, has worked as a planner for 15 years, having organized and conducted numerous workshops, using both traditional and video delivery techniques. McMahon would be pleased to provide you with more information about technology applications for planning including commissioner video training, multi-media zoning regulations, and telecommunications planning. You can reach her at: Applied Communication Concepts, 2732 Evergreen, Great Falls, MT 59404; tel: 406-452-9780; e-mail: [kcmahon@initco.net](mailto:kcmahon@initco.net).



## Eight Steps

Once you've decided to set up a video-conference, consider taking the following steps (adapted from *Video Teletraining: A Guide to Design, Development, and Use*, developed by the U.S. General Accounting Office's Training Institute):

1. *Select an instructor.*
2. *Develop a time line and assign responsibilities for coordinating the conference.* Identify a lead contact at each site to facilitate communication and distribute materials.
3. *Determine dates, sites, and times.*
4. *Reserve video-conference rooms.* To find out about the availability of a video-conference network, start by contacting local educational institutions. Many schools or colleges are using this technology for distance learning purposes. Often the equipment is available in off-peak hours to other public agencies.

5. *Notify the agencies/departments co-sponsoring the video-conference.* Include a contract or agreement committing the organization to sharing in the costs. Create a brochure announcing the conference.

6. *Set the agenda for the video-conference.* Be sure to include time for breaks and questions. Prepare visual aids and training materials to accompany the presentations.

7. *Check each site.* Each site that will be used for the video-conference should be checked, in advance, by one of the conference organizers to determine procedures for that site and become familiar with its layout.

8. *Arrive early.* Get to the conference site at least 30 minutes prior to the start of the workshop, to set up and test the equipment. Check camera angles, room arrangement, equipment location, and other special needs.

## Video Testimony in Santa Barbara County



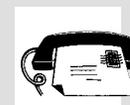
Video-conferencing need not be limited to training. Santa Barbara County, California, accepts testimony at public

hearings using the same technology. Residents in "North County" Santa Barbara can testify from a remote site near where they live during Board of Supervisors hearings.

To testify from the remote location, the person requesting to speak fills out a speaker slip and faxes it to the Board. When the Chair of the Board calls on that person, the videographer simultaneously puts the speaker on the television in the Board Hearing Room, and puts it live on cable TV channel 20, which is telecast countywide. The speaker is sent a live wide shot of the Board of Supervisors while addressing them.

Since it is difficult for the person operating the system to set the cameras when there is a lot of back and forth dialogue, the system is used primarily as a remote testimony system. But it can be used for regular video-conferences as well.

To accommodate this new way of conducting public hearings, Santa Barbara County worked with the California legislature to amend the "Open Meeting Law" to allow public input from remote locations. For more information on the Santa Barbara system, call Silvio Motta, the Government Access TV Production Supervisor, at: 805-568-3424.



## Resources:

To order *Video Teletraining: A Guide to Design, Development, and Use*, referenced in the "Eight Steps" sidebar, call:

202-512-8674 and request document #155399 (the first copy is free; additional copies are \$2 apiece).

For a good short article on electronic town meetings, see "Electronic Town Meetings," by Alexis A. Halley and Robert E. Horn of The Meridian International Institute, available at the Alliance Learning Network's web site:

[www.alliance.napawash.org/alliance/index.html](http://www.alliance.napawash.org/alliance/index.html) (use the site's search index, typing "town meeting" in the text field to find the article).