

# Another Meeting?

by Elaine Cogan

“Another meeting? I sure didn’t expect the commission to be that busy!”

“If I had known what I was getting into, I never would have let the mayor talk me into this.”

“You’ll just have to count me out next Wednesday. It’s my bowling night.”

If these or similar comments are such a familiar refrain that meetings are plagued by spotty attendance or lackluster participation, your planning board has a serious problem. Even the most diligent members must be absent sometimes, but this should be the exception not the rule. Following are examples of board members who exhibit such behavior and suggestions for what can be done about it.

*Rejects special meetings.* This member is willing to attend most or all scheduled meetings but balks at extra ones, even though the rest of the board may think it is essential. She may be a very organized person who allots only so much time to each activity and does not want to give her planning role one hour more than she “signed up for.” Or she may be just marginally interested in the position.

If you ignore her needs with surprise or sudden meetings, you probably will have to put up with her absence. She might agree to attend an extra meeting once in a while, if it is set in advance so she has sufficient time to adjust her schedule. On the other hand, it is important to discipline yourselves and not have a habit of calling extra meetings. This is a disservice to all volunteer commissioners.

*Unreliable attendee.* This commission member never can be counted on, even for regular meetings. Though he agrees to come, he often has a last minute “emergency.” Many planning boards can replace members who miss a certain number of meetings in a row. But what about the person who is absent sporadically?

The chair should have a frank talk with him or with the office holder who appointed him, explaining how important it is to have all members attend regularly. Or speak to him personally, appealing to his sense of importance, “We really need your input, Tom and miss you when you’re not here.” With these approaches, you are likely to find the unreliable attendee improves his attendance, at least for a while.

“YOU’LL JUST HAVE TO COUNT ME OUT NEXT WEDNESDAY. IT’S MY BOWLING NIGHT.”

*Commissioner “in name only.”* This commissioner has a sterling attendance record but rarely, if ever, participates. If he is truly disinterested, he may show it by yawning or tapping his pencil on the desk. Lack of participation can have other causes. He may be shy or convinced his opinion is not worth much. Whatever the reason for the behavior, the result is the same: a non-functioning member who dilutes the effectiveness of board discussions and decisions.

Do not let this behavior continue without specific efforts to draw him out. Commission members or the chair can ask him a pointed question such as “Joe, you have lots of experience in this area, what do you think?” or “before we vote, let’s hear from everyone who hasn’t said anything so far.” To show how much he is valued, use his remarks as a point of reference to your own. He probably never will be the first to raise his hand, but he may feel more comfortable participating.

Not all members can be expected to have the same level of commitment.

Retirees may have more time than business or professional people. The politically ambitious may view the appointment more as an impressive line on a resume than a commitment toward actual work.

Your community can increase the likelihood of having effective planning commissioners by taking several steps. First, make sure that all potential members are aware of what they are being asked to “sign up” for. Whoever makes the appointments should have a clear understanding of the responsibilities required of the commission, conveying this to potential appointees. To make sure everyone has the same information, draw up a “job description.” Some people may decline after learning what this unpaid service entails.

Very soon after a new member is appointed, the chair or planning director should set up an introductory meeting to explain the ground rules and expectations and answer any questions about the workload and the level of preparation and participation necessary.

Finally, if you find that attendance by several commissioners continues to be a problem, it may be that your meetings are uninteresting or unchallenging. If so, ask yourselves if you spend too much time rubber-stamping development projects or staff recommendations and not enough time doing long-range planning. The latter is a challenging but fascinating task that should keep all commissioners actively involved. ♦

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