

Do You Have the “Write” Stuff?

by Elaine Cogan

There are two ways planning staff communicates with the public: verbally... over the counter, personal meetings, on the phone, and at commission meetings; or through written notices, announcements, FAX, letters, and formal documents. The advantage of face-to-face, or even voice-to-voice, communication is that an alert listener can look for body language or voice inflection to get some idea about what the other person is thinking and try to clear up any misunderstandings.

A written communication does not have those advantages. It is one-way. You compose it and send it out, hoping the receiver will get the message and interpret it your way. Planners use writing as a primary mode of communication in many instances, expecting the public to understand the subject or issue and respond appropriately. And too often, the words are written to satisfy legal requirements, with little or no consideration for the receiver, generally a layperson with only vague knowledge of planning jargon.

This is an example of a real notice sent by a Planning Department USA. Its style should be familiar to most planning commissioners and staff.

Notice of Hearing to Rezone Property Regarding Petition No. 178922 PB, related to former Petition NOI5588210 PB, tax parcel 089345-214-576. The city is entertaining said petition from Thomas Henderson, owner of property at 2900 Elm Street, to rezone the property from RS-2 to PS. The first public hearing will be held...

Read this notice from the citizen's point of view. If you think there is nothing wrong with it as the primary way to communicate about proposed planning actions, look again. It may satisfy all the legal requirements, but it fails to help the lay reader understand what may happen to an area of town they probably care about. People who

receive such a notice react in several predictable ways. The majority trash it, reasoning they have better things to do with their time than trying to understand yet another practically unintelligible piece of paper from the government.

TRY WRITING
EXPLANATIONS IN PLAIN,
NON-BUREAUCRATIC
LANGUAGE.

A few call the planning office to find out what is going on, often expressing their frustration in language unsuited for this column. A few others may gossip with their neighbors about what “they” are doing to “us” again, often confusing what little facts they may have. Some show up at the hearing and ask questions that exasperate you because you thought they were spelled out in the notice.

In contrast, consider this citizen-friendly version:

Proposal to Change Use of Residential Property

Thomas Henderson, living at 2900 Elm Street, has asked the city to rezone his property from RS-2, (residential use) to PS-1 (public service) to allow construction of a senior or community center. The first meeting to consider this...

This first paragraph should be followed by an equally understandable explanation of the planning process and all the steps to follow. To satisfy statutory requirements, you can attach the legal notice.

Put yourself in the shoes of the citizen receiving the second notice, where the issue is stated upfront in a clear and unambiguous way. While (because of past experience with other government missives) there is no guarantee most of the receivers will not trash it anyway, those who do take

the time to read it will understand it.

Planning commissioners can play a pivotal role in this written communication process if they have not allowed themselves to become so inured to planning jargon that they have forgotten what it is to read a planning notice as an average citizen would.

Experiment with titles that actually say what you mean, such as “Street-Widening Proposed” instead of something more typical that is certain to confuse: “Notice for Potential Vacation of Certain Streets for Purposes of Accommodating Traffic.” Try writing explanations in plain, non-bureaucratic language. You may find it a challenge to say what you really mean, but it will be worth it. ♦

Elaine Cogan, partner in the Portland, Oregon, planning and communications firm of Cogan Owens Cogan, is a consultant to many communities undertaking strategic planning or visioning processes. Her column appears in each issue of the PCJ.

