

Teaching “New Dogs” New Tricks

by Elaine Cogan

“I know that I’m new on the commission and you’ve probably covered this before, but...”

This is a common opening remark by some newly appointed planning board members who then go on to ask question after question about material the board has, indeed, discussed before. The rest of the members are polite but understandably restless. Why does the newcomer expect us to stop the action during the meeting so that he can catch up? Why hasn’t he done his homework ahead of time?

Another type of new member is so reticent to speak up that you do not hear from her for the first six months. When asked for an opinion, she answers modestly, “I really don’t know enough yet to say anything. I’ll just have to pass.”

In both cases... the *eager beaver* who has no compunction about holding up deliberations until he understands everything, or the *nervous newcomer* who does not say a word until she is completely comfortable... the board is handicapped by not having its full complement of informed, participating members.

The best strategy for integrating new members into the work of the commission is to have a deliberate system of orientation. It can be organized by staff, but should have full commission participation. The following techniques can help.

Board Handbook. A loose-leaf notebook with all pertinent ordinances or rules should be given to every new member. Include minutes from the last three to six months so the individual can be apprised of the board’s previous activities. This notebook can be a useful reference as well as the repository of all subsequent agendas and materials.

Informal Orientation. With the notebook as the basis for discussion, the planning director, board chair or designated senior member should meet infor-

mally with each new member to answer any questions and supply background information that may not be evident from the written materials.

It is critical that new members understand the planning process: what the board’s roles and responsibilities are; how applications are received; how and when

MOST PEOPLE ARE
SURPRISED BY THE PUBLIC
EXPOSURE THAT COMES
WITH BEING ON A
PLANNING COMMISSION.

information is made available to commissioners; when meetings are held; and all matters specific to the smooth planning operation in your community.

While you want to be frank and open, it is important to avoid gossiping or expressing your own opinion about other board members. Remarks such as these are off limits: “Jon likes to complain about everything, so you have to take what he says with a grain of salt” or “Helen talks too much, but frankly, she has lots of friends and we don’t want to get her angry.”

Retreat. If several new commissioners are taking office at the same time, organize a retreat away from city hall so that you can get to know each other as well as orient them to city and board policies and procedures. If you have “open meeting” requirements, you will need to be sure your retreat is advertised to the public and accessible to all.

A retreat does not have to be the expensive boondoggle trip citizens rightly frown upon. Much can be accomplished at a one-day or even one-evening affair at a local college, senior or community center.

Regardless of the orientation process, long time members need to be patient with newcomers. Most will become constructive participants on the board. New members often bring fresh ideas and perspectives. Welcome this input, and you may find your commission has gained a new spark of energy.

But suppose one or two continue to be less than full participating members, either by trying to cover ground you have discussed previously, or by being shy about participating at all?

To the *eager beaver*, the chair needs to be firm but polite. “Yes, we have discussed this before and all the information is in your notebook. As you can see by the agenda, we have a full evening. I’m sure you can catch up by listening to the discussion. If you’re really uncertain, you may not want to vote.”

To the *nervous newcomer*, try something like this: “We were all new at one time, Nate. I’m sure you have something to contribute from your previous experiences. We’d really like to hear from you.”

Most people are surprised by the public exposure that comes with being on a planning commission. Facing a sea of citizens at a contentious public meeting can faze nearly everyone. Reassure the new members that you understand, having been there, and support them in their first efforts to participate. Give them the tools and confidence they need to function productively and they probably will. ♦

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.

