

Welcome to the Commission!

A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Editor's Note: The following are excerpts from a telephone conference call / roundtable discussion held with members of the PCJ's Editorial Advisory Board. The topic: how planning boards deal with new members. I think you'll find some interesting insights.

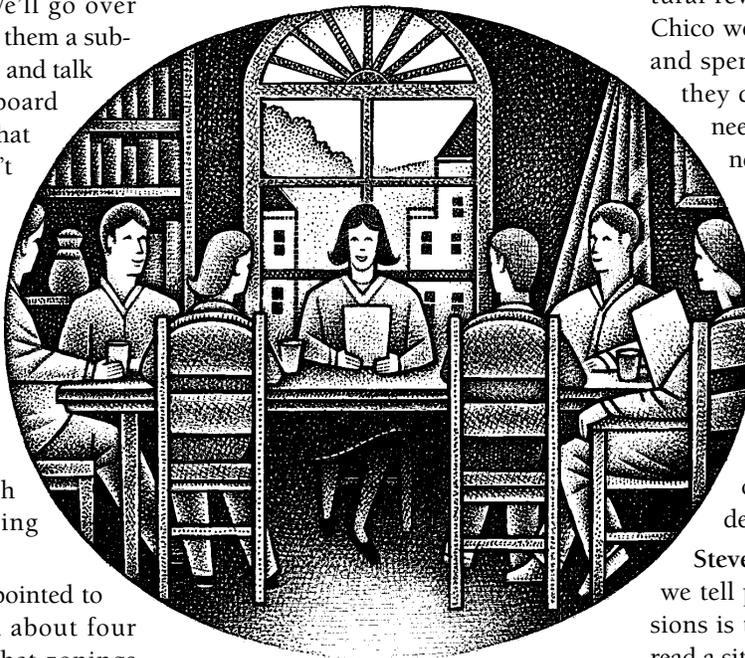
Wayne Senville (Editor, PCJ): I'd like to open our discussion by asking what you've found helpful in getting new planning board members "up to speed" after they're appointed?

Ross Moldoff: I do a couple of things. Once I find out who's been appointed, I call the person, welcome them, and offer to sit down with them. We'll go over some of the basics. I'll show them a subdivision plan and a site plan, and talk about what the planning board does. Sometimes we find that there are people who don't even know much about what the planning board does and may have only been in town for a couple of years. I also give them a three-ring binder which includes the town zoning ordinance, excerpts from the master plan, and excerpts from a book with tips about being a planning commissioner.

Carl Kohn: When I was appointed to the planning commission about four years ago I had no idea what zonings were like. I didn't know what the comprehensive plan was, or the municipal planning code. It helped to go through a basic course for planning commissioners that's put on by the Pennsylvania State Association of Boroughs. Our tuition and mileage is covered by the borough, all you have to do is put in your time. We were also given publications on zoning, land use, other specific topics, including reprints from some of the Mike Chandler

and Elaine Cogan articles.

Ross Moldoff: I think it would be a great idea if new planning board members, and even long-term ones, could go to some training during the course of the year. We have actually budgeted money for that, but what we find is that between coming out twice per month to regular meetings, and sometimes another meeting for special purposes, our board members are not inclined to go to a special training opportunities unless it's local and we arrange it ourselves.



Steve Langworthy: I'm a planning consultant in Michigan, and some of my client communities have made it a policy not to re-appoint members unless they've attended at least one training session per year or three within their three years.

Irv Schiffman: Let me add something. One of the problems that I see, and I don't know if it's just with new commissioners, is to get them to go outside of

the box a little bit. If they're just told "this is the way we do things here," then you get a lot of status quo. How do you get planning commissioners to ask developers questions like, "have you thought about doing it this way, instead of what you propose?"

It helps if planning commissioners see what's going on elsewhere so they can make comparisons between what's happening in other communities and what's happening in their own. And that can be done through trips, through workshops, through books, through articles. For example when I was on the architectural review board here in the City of Chico we took a bus trip to Sacramento and spent a whole day looking at how they dealt with older buildings that needed to be refurbished and put to new use.

The goal is to expand your horizon. Of course it's very important that commissioners know what the zoning code in their own community requires, but beyond that it's helpful for them to be aware of what other communities are doing to solve some of the same problems they're dealing with.

Steve Langworthy: One of the things we tell people during our training sessions is that they need to learn how to read a site plan. We give them a site plan for a project that's already been built and ask them to take a look at the plan and try to picture the building in their minds. Then take the site plan out to the site and look at it again. They'll learn that the actual buildings look bigger and closer than they do on the plan. The relationship between seeing something in the office and then going out and seeing it on the ground is a big help.

continued on page 4

Welcome... Roundtable Discussion

continued from page 3

USING THE INTERNET

Barbara Sweet: One thing I want to mention is that there are all these documents, not just maps, but written documents that board members need to read. With the Internet, some of these documents can be put online. This way they're available when you want to read them, and everything doesn't have to be printed, copied, and mailed. So bringing the planning office up to the 21st century is an idea to look into.

King Leonard: Santa Barbara County [California] does something which is quite innovative. They put draft ordinances right on their web site. Instead of giving out copy after copy of these drafts, anybody working on that committee can go right to the web site and get the latest version. It saves them a tremendous amount of work, and makes it easier for participants to send back comments on the draft.

Bryan Stumpf: More and more communities are getting web sites. Most are prepared by volunteers who are trying to get information out about their community. This may include the zoning ordinance and other information such as application forms. I've found this has been more helpful to the public in general than to new planning board members. But again it provides a round-the-clock resource that everyone can take advantage of.

KNOWING WHAT YOU'RE GETTING INTO

Wayne Senville: Let me put another question on the table. Do you think planning commissioners know what they're getting into when they apply for an opening?

Steve Langworthy: In many communities, people don't have a clue what they're getting into.

King Leonard: In communities where I've worked, I've used a questionnaire that ask applicants, point blank, are you willing to do the following, and then lists all the kinds of things they'll need to do as a commissioner, so they'll have a good idea when they're applying. The ques-

tionnaire also gives the city council a better way of comparing applicants – seeing where applicants went to school, what they would be bringing to the board, and so on.

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FINDING NEW COMMISSIONERS

Wayne Senville: How do you find people willing to serve on the planning commission?

Ross Moldoff: We put advertisements in the newspaper when there's a vacancy. Our meetings are televised, so we also make an announcement that way. If we're not getting applicants, I will actually call people and ask if they want to serve. This has been very effective. People getting those calls are often flattered that I would think of them!

Carl Kohn: Speaking as someone from a small community, most often we contact people who have attended our meetings, have come in to state an opinion on a particular issue, or have asked questions of a very positive nature. These people, who we've gotten to know, are the ones encouraged to apply for openings. We do not advertise on radio or in the newspaper.

Bryan Stumpf: It's similar in the Indiana communities where I've worked. Those people who have attended meetings, shown some common sense, and were able to articulate their thoughts are often contacted when there's an opening.

Steve Langworthy: One point that needs to be made. I know some people in some of the communities I work with who

think they have to have real estate people or attorneys appointed because of their familiarity with planning and zoning. I don't think this level of experience needs to be, or even should be, important to serving on a planning commission. What you do need is a broad range of people from the community.

King Leonard: I agree. I've seen some ex-building officials go on to serve on the planning commission. It turned into a disaster, partly because they had such specialized knowledge. Planning commissioners are best as generalists, providing oversight. It side tracks everybody if they become highly detail oriented.

DEALING WITH POOR ATTENDANCE

Steve Langworthy: I don't think there's anything more frustrating than when people come to the meeting and open up their packet for the first time when they sit down. Except perhaps when people don't show up at meetings and don't call to say they're going to be absent. Things like that really take away from the function of the commission as a whole.

Wayne Senville: Do you think this happens because people don't know what they're getting into?

Carl Kohn: Sometimes they know what they're getting into, but then the rest of their life gets more complicated and they don't want to back out. So it becomes frustrating for them as well. We have a rule that if someone misses more than half of the meetings of the previous year, we can ask the person to drop out. I think this is often a relief to the person involved.

Irv Schiffman: In my community, if you have unexcused absences from three meetings in a row you're out.

Bryan Stumpf: One of the things I've seen some communities do, at least in those communities that have planning departments with staff, is include in the year-end annual report the attendance of members.

Wayne Senville: Here in Burlington, Vermont, the city council receives the attendance records for everyone on every commission or board.

ADVICE TO NEW MEMBERS

Wayne Senville: Let me ask all of you, if there were one piece of advice you could give to a planning director or planning commission chair in terms of dealing with new members, what would that be?

King Leonard: The chair needs to take new members aside and say, "for the first couple of meetings, why don't you lay back and watch, and if you have questions come to me during a break or after the meeting."

Ross Moldoff: I agree with King. I think new board members learn a lot from watching for a couple of meetings. My experience is that most naturally tend to do this.

Steve Langworthy: A good, experienced chair can orient new members about how meetings are run, what is expected, those kind of things. It can be done in as little as ten minutes, or over lunch.

Barbara Sweet: You might also videotape

some meetings, and then use ones where certain situations came up, so that a new member can see how things were handled – or how things might be handled a little better next time.

Bryan Stumpf: I think it's important to encourage new members to feel comfortable taking advantage of staff support, and knowing that they can call staff with any questions they may have.

Irv Schiffman: One of the most important things is for the staff planner or council to emphasize to new commissioners the importance of their role for the future of the community, and of the need for commissioners to work effectively together and be innovative.

Carl Kohn: A new member has to do a lot of homework to understand what the whole thing is all about. Also, a new member needs to realize that in meetings there's sometimes pressure from some group to resolve a problem quickly.

Coming Soon:

We're in the process of putting together a "reader" specially designed for new planning board members. You'll receive more details about it early this Fall.

Wayne Senville, Editor, PCJ

I think new members are more likely to feel they have to get this decided, or they'll make an extremely positive statement which they cannot change, or feel they can't change. It's important to realize that perhaps your first reaction to something may not be the best – and that you might change your mind as you think it through. I know I've had that experience where something looks pretty good right at the beginning and then as we thought about it, talked about it, and put it over for another month we began to realize what some of the underlying issues were. ♦

Meet Some of the Members of Our Editorial Advisory Board



Carl F.W. Kohn is a retired United Methodist pastor. He attended Planning Commission meetings in Carroll Valley, Pennsylvania, until appointed to the Commission in September, 1995. He was also appointed in 1996 (and then elected, in 1997) to the Carroll Valley Borough Council.



Steve Langworthy is a principal in the community planning firm of Langworthy LeBlanc, Inc., in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His background includes six years as a city planning director and zoning administrator and over thirteen years as a consulting planner. Langworthy is author of the Planning Commissioners Handbook for the Michigan Municipal League.

Barbara Sweet serves on the Hyde Park, New York, Masterplan Committee and on the Hyde Park Crossroads Committee. She is also Secretary of the Town of Hyde Park Historical Society, and teaches Intro to Computers to folks 55 and older at Marist College.



King Leonard, a principal with The Oakhill Group in Lompoc, California, has over thirty years of experience in city planning, redevelopment, city administration, landscape design and construction, and has served as a consultant to numerous cities, counties, and agencies during his career. Leonard has also served as Planning Director for two cities over a fifteen year period.



Ross Moldoff has been Planning Director for the Town of Salem, New Hampshire for the past fifteen years. Prior to this, he worked for regional planning commissions in Dover and Exeter, New Hampshire. His professional interests focus on using better design to improve the quality of development and controlling strip development in particular.



Irv Schiffman is a Professor of Political Science and the former Director of the Master's Program in Rural & Town Planning at California State University, Chico. He is the author of Alternative Techniques for Managing Growth (University of California, Berkeley, 1999), and has conducted workshops and written extensively in the areas of planning, environmental policy, and land use implementation. Schiffman authored "The Property Rights Challenge: What's a Planner to Do?" in the Winter 1996 issue of the PCJ.



Bryan Stumpf is a project manager in the Indianapolis office of HNTB, a national architecture, engineering, and planning firm. With over ten years experience in planning and landscape architecture, he prepares comprehensive plans and land use ordinances for communities throughout the Midwest. He also serves as the Planning Director for Greenfield, Indiana, a small city in the Indianapolis area.

Welcome to the Commission!

Editor's Introduction: What are the most important pieces of advice you would give a newly appointed member of a plan commission or board? Planning commissioners from across the country took up our challenge to put their thoughts down on paper. I think you'll find the advice quite interesting. If you're a "veteran" planning board member, how would your advice compare? Over the coming year, we plan on running additional short essays by commission members on this and other topics.

"The Only Dumb Question ..."

by Stephen F. DeFeo, Jr.

New members are often apprehensive about their role on the planning board. When I was appointed to my city's planning board, there were no seminars, classes, or Internet sites available to prepare me for my first meeting, not to mention my first public hearing. There was no training period. It was baptism by fire.

Based on several years' experience as a member and chair, let me offer the following words of advice to new members.

1. *Ask questions.* The first question you need to ask is of yourself – do you have time to commit to the board? Your ability to attend meetings is important. However, it is paramount that a board member commits time to prepare for meetings. Once appointed, don't be reluctant to ask questions of other board members and the planning staff. The staff is there to assist and advise the board.

At your board's public meetings, ask questions. Other board members, or citizens in attendance, may have the same question in the back of their mind. The old adage "the

ADVICE FROM SIX PLANNING COMMISSIONERS

only dumb question is the one not asked" is true. A new board member will not (and should not) be chastised for asking basic questions to understand the issue before the board.

2. *Be prepared.* Preparation in advance of the meeting will make you a more effective board member, better suited to serve your community. It is not fair to the applicant, fellow board members, or the community you were sworn to serve to enter the meeting unprepared. Open the plans and read the documents relating to items on the agenda before the meeting. Know what the agenda items entail and what action the board is expected to take. But don't worry about being an expert or an authority on the issues before the board.

3. *Avoid Conflicts of Interest.* Inevitably, during your tenure on the planning board there will be an occasion when your employer, your attorney, a family member, the builder who constructed your home, or some other person you have a close relationship to appears before you. Seek advice from your planning staff or your board's legal counsel if you are not sure whether a conflict, or the appearance of a conflict, may exist. You may need to avoid participating in any action that has even the appearance of conflicting interest.

4. *Know the Law.* Planning board members are sworn to uphold the Constitution of the United States, their state constitution, federal and state statutes, and the ordinances of their community. This means that decisions must be based upon legal considerations. Decisions made by the planning board that are inconsistent with the law or are made arbitrarily are never in the best interest of the community.

Stephen F. DeFeo, Jr. is Chairman of the Methuen [Massachusetts] Community Development and Planning Board, and has served on the Board since 1990. Methuen is a small city (population 42,000) located about thirty miles north of Boston. Stephen works as a construction engineer with Judith Nitsch Engineering in Boston.



Orient Yourself

by Theresa Long

1. *Orient yourself.*

Get to know your material and your commission make-up as soon as possible. Zoning codes can be unwieldy and difficult to read through. Mucking through the sign provisions of your zoning code can be pretty tiring. It's better to orient yourself by sitting down with the retiring commission member, the chair, or another experienced member. Let them quickly outline the various documents and maps with which you will be working. Not only will these individuals concisely summarize the zoning structure, they will often identify the controversial areas, and the political and public hot potatoes that can lead to lengthy meetings and distressed neighbors. They may also give you a better understanding of the group dynamics in which you will work. You will emerge with a general knowledge that can make you more comfortable and more effective starting with your first meeting.

2. *Get training.* Acquire some training as soon as possible. In my state of Virginia, for example, a planning commissioners certification course (taught by PCJ columnist Mike Chandler) is offered. Training courses like this will provide valuable knowledge and background, and help you to constructively and creatively contribute to your municipality's planning process.



3. *Be open to new ideas.* Avoid tunnel vision and the “we’ve always done it that way” approach. Be familiar with other communities with similar situations. Be able to direct staff where to search out resources. Be open to new suggestions and be proactive in planning for your community’s future.

Theresa Long is Chairman of the Northampton County [Virginia] Joint Local Planning Commission and has been the Town of Cheriton’s representative on the Commission for eleven years. Besides being the mother of seven, Theresa is also a registered nurse with a degree in Environmental Science from Rutgers University.

Think Before You Respond

by Cheryl R. Roberts

If you have never held a public position before, understand that being a planning commissioner can change your perception about how plans are made and cities are governed. It is very easy to take pot shots at elected and appointed officials when you are a concerned citizen. Once you have made the transition to being a decision maker, you realize how difficult the decisions can be. You are often called upon to approve plans that are unpopular with a group of citizens. They may be very unhappy with your decision and stay angry with you for years but you have to make the best decision anyway.

Be prepared to study and learn about your locality’s land use plans and policies. This will give you a basis for making thoughtful, informed decisions. Also, familiarize yourself with all issues that come before your board. These may seem like simplistic suggestions, but they are important to doing your job effectively.

Think carefully before you respond to demands from citizens and developers. Often a salient issue will come to the attention of citizens before you, as a board member, have all the facts. Resist the urge to express your opinion until you are sure about where you stand on the issue. This is good advice for all board members.

Cheryl R. Roberts recently completed her term on the Planning Board in Huntersville, North Carolina.

“Have a Lot of Fun”

by Roberta Peters

When I was first appointed to the city planning commission, I was told by a former commissioner that I was going to “have a lot of fun” in my new position. I was totally mystified by that remark and couldn’t imagine a less-fun job than the one I now faced: a monthly commitment to attend boring meetings and a responsibility to bone up on the most mind-numbing kind of reading – ordinances, regulations, and statutes.

Now in my eighth year on the board, I think I may have grasped some meaning in that comment and have concluded that, while his choice of words might have been better, he did know what he was talking about. Looking back at the projects and neighborhood issues that have passed through our hands on their way to the city council and then on to resolution and completion, I have to admit to feeling a sense of pride and accomplishment as well as one of satisfaction in knowing that I have had a hand in the future of my town. And satisfaction can be a form of happiness, if not outright fun.

My first year was difficult, as I struggled to learn my duties and responsibilities and grappled with how best to deal with a fickle public. But now I think the “have fun” directive was a piece of advice: Don’t take yourself too seriously. I have a tendency to do that anyway, so it took me a while to relax and enjoy what a planning commission can accomplish.

In my zeal to learn the ropes, I rolled up my sleeves and plowed through as many books and articles as I could find. Then, as each project or zoning application was set to come before our board, I researched the applicable regulations and statutes before the meeting, because I didn’t want to make uninformed decisions – nor did I wish to look stupid in public.

The result was that I sometimes had a leg up on some of the other board members, and I occasion-

ally found myself catching details others had missed. Yeah, that was fun.

Now, as I drive around town and see subdivisions springing up and new businesses coming to town, I like to take my friends or visiting relatives with me, because it’s fun to point out the changes I helped to make.

I still enjoy learning new things, so I “have a lot of fun” going to the annual state association conferences, where I meet planning officials from other communities and find out how they handle the issues in their towns. And sometimes I find answers to the difficult ones faced at home.

My best advice to new members on a planning board, then, is to diligently learn as much as possible by reading, asking questions of professionals and staff with more experience, and by attending workshops and conferences as often as they’ll let you. It’s easier to relax and enjoy the trip when you know where you’re going, or at least how to get there.

Roberta Peters is a Planning Commissioner in Sidney, Nebraska. As Roberta puts it, “I’m one of those people who thinks everything is interesting. So I’ve done a lot of things through the years. Like 25 years as a doctor, 8 years as a journalist, and 6 years as an electrician and telephone repair person.” Most recently, she has turned “computer geek” and is now a “PC repair technician, system consultant and web page maker.”

Skills You Will Need

by Ann R. McReynolds

Before you agree to serve on the planning commission in your community, you should be sure you have both the desire and time to attend commission meetings. Your time commitment also involves becoming thoroughly knowledgeable about your community’s zoning code, in addition to reviewing petitions (for proposed new development, rezoning issues, etc.) prior to the meetings.

You may also need to spend time acquiring some practical knowledge, such as the basics of reading surveys and site plans;

continued on page 8



Welcome..., Advice...

continued from page 7

familiarity with real estate and planning jargon; an understanding of property rights; and some historical perspective on your community.

However, no matter how well you prepare intellectually for your role as commissioner, there is one simple fact you will learn and never forget: most people do not like change. It doesn't really matter if they represent the fifth generation of their family to live in your town, or if they have just finished unpacking from a cross-country move. Be prepared! Comments and opinions will be passionately delivered, even if they're not always logical.

Furthermore, you cannot always predict what kind of reaction a petition will arouse. What may seem like an innocuous request can trigger the most outraged objections by neighbors ... and by some who live on the other side of town from the proposed change! They will write you letters and leave messages on your answering machine if you're not at home, hoping to make you aware of their personal loss if this petition is approved. Then too, you may receive calls and letters from members of the local economic development board, trying to sway you in favor of attracting a new development to enhance the tax base.

Be strong! Although knowledge, experience, and willingness to learn are important skills for a commissioner to have, they are less important than the personal skills you will need to rely on during all but the most perfunctory of meetings:

- *patience* to listen calmly to drawn out, repetitive, and angry comments by concerned citizens.
- *self-confidence* to speak out and ask those hard questions that need to be asked.
- *willingness* to ask for guidance from the staff planning officials and legal counsel.
- *objectivity*, in order to separate objectionable personalities from their otherwise reasonable claims.



- *courage* to make wise decisions for the betterment of your entire community.

And one last thought ... don't lose your sense of *humor*, for it may be your best ally for getting through a difficult evening.

Ann R. McReynolds has served on the Plan Commission of Webster Groves, Missouri, for three years, and was recently named its Chair. According to Ann, Webster Groves is a "150 year old 'suburb' of St. Louis, just 10 miles from downtown, but more like a small town of under 24,000 people."

What Type of Planning Commissioner Will You Be?

by Ron Ames

When I became a planning commissioner I really had very little idea of what was expected of me or by whom. I don't think this is unusual.

I attended a meeting, saw a few presentations by staff and applicants, and motions for favorable recommendations were passed. I assumed this was only the tip of the iceberg and sent in my application and was appointed.

Soon, the new commissioners received our "training" from the city attorney and the director of planning in the hour preceding our first official act.

We had two roles, one quasi judicial and one quasi legislative. The only quasi legislative function we had was the preparation of the master plan. The planning director briefly explained the process, we asked about three questions and went into the council chamber where we listened to a few presentations and voted.

What I had thought was tip of the iceberg was, in fact, the whole iceberg!

"Do planners plan?" This is also a question for planning commissioners. Most do not.

There are fundamentally three types of planning commissioners. The first type think they should have some title after their last name and planning com-

missioner is as good as any. The second type believe in giving public service, prepare well for commission meetings, and participate thoughtfully. The third type of commissioner, however, take this one step further. Because of a personal commitment to excellence, the third type will make an extra effort to become especially well informed about their community, about planning ideas and techniques, and about ways in which the planning commission can work towards creating a better community.

This third type of commissioner may occasionally be a pain to the planning staff, an annoyance to the town council, and the enemy of half of the land development industry (but the honest friend of the other half). However, they'll be the ones who help move the community forward.

While I would like to think there could be a commission composed of only the third type of commissioner, I know that to have one or two is about the best most communities can expect. But if you are one of those, I encourage you to develop a plan for what you and your fellow commissioners want to accomplish during the next year. This exercise, in itself, almost guarantees that you will become a better trained, better prepared, and more forward looking body. The effort you expend will help to chase away (or convert) those commissioners of the first type!

Ron Ames is a member of the Town of Parker [Colorado] Planning Commission. According to Ron, Parker is one of the fastest growing towns in the U.S., having increased

from a 15 percent annual growth rate (for the past six years) to more than 20 percent last year. Ron is an engineer, and began his career on the Apollo program, having since worked for businesses large and small.

