

Planning Commissioner Perspectives

THE MOST IMPORTANT ATTRIBUTES OF A STRONG PLANNING COMMISSION

Diversity; Outreach; Constructive Recommendations

by Monica Craven

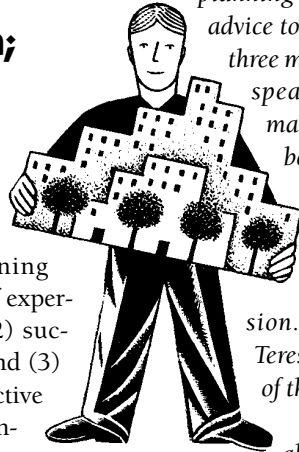
From my perspective, the three most important characteristics of an effective planning commission are: (1) a variety of expertise among commissioners, (2) successful community outreach, and (3) the ability to formulate constructive recommendations to the governing body.

An effective planning commission is composed of members with different backgrounds and expertise. A commission too heavy in any one profession, be it lawyer, architect, planner, developer, economist, or any one point of view – preservationist, environmentalist, pro-development, anti-development – only limits the effectiveness of the commission. An ideal planning commission has a blend of backgrounds and interests that reflect the variety of opinions in the community as a whole.

An effective planning commission reaches out to the community and does not limit its interaction with the community to a single public hearing. With the help of the planning staff, the planning commission can organize and participate in outreach efforts such as public forums and walking tours, to name a few. Community input into a proposed project before the public hearing can also lead the developer to improve the project. By involving the community early in the process, the effective planning commission also lays the groundwork not only for more relevant public testimony, but for a more cohesive discussion of the issues among the commission itself.

The third characteristic of an effective

Editor's Note: In the last issue of the Planning Commissioners Journal you heard six planning board members offer some advice to new members. In this issue, three more planning commissioners speak to the question of what makes for an effective planning board. We asked them to discuss what they felt were the two or three most important attributes of a strong planning commission. The final short essay, by Teresa Levitch, looks at the role of the commission's chairperson.



We hope to run additional perspectives from planning commissioners in future issues of the PCJ. I hope some of you will consider sharing what you've learned with your "colleagues" across the country. Please call or e-mail our office (1-888-475-3328, toll free; pcj@together.net), and we can discuss what's involved in submitting a short essay.

planning commission is its ability to give constructive recommendations to the governing body. A planning commission that merely rubber stamps the recommendation of the planning staff, or is not well educated on the issues at hand, is not in a position to make a recommendation that will be of any use to elected officials. However, a planning commission that has done its homework throughout the process can discuss the issues knowledgeably. After public testimony has been given, it can hone in on the relevant outstanding concerns, discuss each separately and thoroughly and, after all issues have been aired, consider a detailed motion that includes all aspects of the project. The effective planning commission concludes the public hearing not just



with a ye or nay vote but with specific recommendations that will give the elected body a framework for its own deliberations.

Monica Craven has been a member of the Arlington County, Virginia, Planning Commission since 1994 and chaired the Commission in 1999. She serves on the Commission's Long-Range Planning Committee, Site Plan Review Subcommittee, and chairs the Zoning Ordinance Review Committee. In her "other life" she is Administrative Assistant to the Superintendent of Schools for the Catholic Diocese of Arlington.

Knowledge; Willingness to Listen; Objectivity

by Carl F.W. Kohn

Three important characteristics of an effective planning commission are: (1) a working knowledge of local zoning ordinances in relation to the local history and the comprehensive plan; (2) a willingness to listen to the public without compromising local planning principles; and (3) the ability to be objective in making planning decisions.

These characteristics are not totally mutually exclusive, but represent different facets of how an effective planning commission does its job.

First of all, planning commissioners must know the community's guiding laws – its zoning ordinances. Such knowledge cannot be merely a memorization of the ordinances. Rather, it must involve understanding the ordinances in the context of what the community has been and become; what has contributed to its success; and what has prevented inappropriate growth and development.

The second characteristic of an effective planning commission is a willingness to listen with sensitivity to the public. Neither the planning commission nor the

community's zoning ordinances came into being or operate in an isolated, sterile, or ideal environment. Despite a working knowledge of the ordinances (and perhaps an inclination therefore to issue decisions as Zeus would from Mount Olympus), the planning commission members need to know the perspectives of the citizens who live in the midst of the situation the decision would affect.

The third important characteristic of an effective planning commission is in some ways the obverse of the first. It is the planning commission's ability to be objective in making decisions, remaining faithful to local ordinances and plans, despite public pressure to decide a matter in a particular way. The effective planning commission needs to be aware of such pressures, but not be swayed by them in making a decision.

Carl F.W. Kohn is a member of the Carroll Valley, Pennsylvania, Planning Commission, and a retired United Methodist pastor. He also serves on the Planning Commissioners Journal's Editorial Advisory Board.

Working Relationships; Community Education; Ethics

by Jim Harris

An effective planning commission must enjoy an internal harmony in order to work with other groups such as elected officials and professional planners, and ensure good communication between its members. The commission should work together. Organizations which experience internal conflicts seldom perform well, and are less likely to unify their energies towards meeting their goals.

In addition to maintaining good internal communication, the commission must have good working relationships with other organizations in the community. The most important group the commission deals with is the city council or other legislative body. It is important also to work effectively with other governmental organizations and agencies such as school boards, highway departments, federal agencies, and even other planning commissions. A commission must interact

with citizens and special interest groups to assure that planning is consistent with community needs and desires.

A planning commission should also take the responsibility to educate the community. Citizens cannot be expected to be familiar with zoning ordinances and planning matters, but the planning commission, through the use of public hearings, public meetings, and joint work sessions can effectively communicate and educate the public.

Public hearings and meetings allow two-way communication between the commission and the community. The result should pave the way for improved possibilities for public support.

Last, but not least, establish good integrity and a code of ethics and abide by them. For example, avoid conflicts of interest and refuse gifts and favors from anyone if they are offered. You should also avoid political activity in which your position as a planning commissioner may bring influence. As a planning commissioner you hold an important position of public responsibility.

Jim Harris is a planning commissioner for the City of North Ogden, Utah. He formerly worked as an engineer and master planner, and now operates his own photography and graphic design business.

THE ROLE OF THE COMMISSION'S CHAIRPERSON

Chairing the Board

by Teresa Levitch

Being appointed the chairperson of a town planning or zoning board means that you have a different responsibility than just attending meetings. As the chairperson, your new responsibilities include making the community feel they are a part of the process, communicating with the other town boards, and educating the public about the planning process.

Many people who attend town planning or zoning board meetings do not know the process of a public meeting. You

have a duty to make sure the meeting is planned in an efficient and democratic manner. Many people attending the meeting may not know the proper way or time to address the board. The chairperson should have a detailed, well-prepared agenda and follow it. It is helpful to the public to have extra copies of the agenda available, especially at controversial public hearings. The chairperson is responsible for maintaining order. This means enforcing the rules so the board can work in the most expedient and impartial manner. Reading a guide to Robert's Rules will provide you with an outline to follow.

Communication with members of other town boards is another important job of the chairperson. One way to do this is to request copies of each board's minutes. You should also have a copy of your board's minutes sent to the other boards. This will help ensure that everyone is aware of the principal issues facing the town.

The chairperson should also seek assistance from other organizations when the planning or zoning board needs some help in doing its job. In my town in upstate New York there are a variety of groups we can draw on, including the Board of Health, the County Planning Board, the State Department of Environmental Conservation, the Cooperative Extension Service, our State Association of Towns, and the New York Planning Federation.

Organizations like these can provide useful information on a range of issues, as well as training opportunities to help board members in their role.

Chairing your board or commission is an exciting venture. You will have an important role in the community's development and land use decision making process. The decisions you make and your ability to communicate with members of your own and other boards make being the chairperson a challenging job.

Teresa Levitch is Chairperson of the Zoning Board of Appeals in the Town of Union Vale, located in Dutchess County, New York. She lives in a Hamlet Zone with her husband and two daughters.

