

How Can We Harness Our Passion for Planning?

It is fascinating to read correspondence to the *Planning Commissioners Journal* from planning board members in different parts of the country. Most of those who share their thoughts with us are enthusiastic and yes, passionate, about their unpaid and often unappreciated work. That is perhaps the best indication that planning is alive and well in our thousands of diverse communities.

How can we communicate at least some of this feeling when the only planning issues that seem to concern the general public relate to possible threats to their own neighborhoods or livelihoods?

Much of planning is ritualistic: fill out the proper forms, pay the fee, meet the regulations. In most cases, the outcome is assured and generally accepted. Understandably, this routine rarely evokes passion or advocacy. There are planning processes, however, where passion is appropriate, and can even be helpful.

As an example, your community is embarking on a process to develop your first comprehensive parks and open space plan. When first you consider the project, it may seem that this planning exercise surely will be non-controversial and unlikely to arouse strong feelings. Everyone likes parks, and we never seem to have enough. Right? Sure, but, probe further and you will soon find that parks and open space mean different things to different people.

Naturalists and environmentalists have a decidedly different vision than those who favor well-manicured green lawns. There will never be enough playing fields for the sports enthusiasts. Advocates for appropriate access for the physically impaired will be concerned. You will hear from those who favor areas in which their pets can run free. People

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can indeed be passionate about these and other aspects of parks and open space planning. You can either ignore their interests until you have circulated the

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plan, or harness their passion for positive purposes. In many cases, it is as important to make a plan for the planning process as it is to create the actual plan. Consider these steps.

Start slowly. Before publicly announcing a new planning process for parks and open space, consult informally with staff, community leaders, and local elected officials. Why is this project needed? Is there a perceived or real crisis? Though it is more desirable to plan when you have the luxury of being ahead of the problem, it may also be more challenging to interest the citizenry.

Broaden your reach. Seek out people and organizations with opinions on all sides of the subject. Appoint them to task forces or advisory committees, ask them to be the eyes and ears of the community, and listen to what they tell you.

Get the word out. Work with the media early on to explain the project and enlist their support for the planning process, without asking them to commit to supporting the outcome. Too often, we

rely only on ubiquitous and largely ineffective press releases to communicate with the media, and are upset when the coverage is not to our liking. Enlist the media's participation in the planning process from the very beginning by offering to provide information for background stories and always being accessible and available. This will not guarantee support but will most likely give you a valuable conduit to the public.

Court the kids. Planning can be a natural part of the curriculum, and the schools should be invited to participate. A word of caution: this requires time and patience. Principals and teachers determine their curricula months in advance and only some will see the value in including a planning project in their overworked schedules. But be persistent. Especially on an issue such as parks and open space, children can canvass their own neighborhoods, write essays, build table models, and participate creatively in many other ways. And if the young are involved, their dotting parents ... and grandparents ... will not be far behind.

These are just some ways you can harness the passion and enthusiasm of your constituents for a planning process. Careful attention to planning before you plan can be the difference between eventual success and failure of the final product. ♦

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