

# Minor Irritants Can Become Major Problems

by Elaine Cogan

It would be extraordinary if planning boards or commissions, whose members rightly are chosen for their particular talents or backgrounds rather than their compatibility or congeniality, were to function smoothly without real effort. Most likely, you were not fast friends before you were appointed, and you may not have social or political relationships outside the commission. Still, the public has the right to expect that you get along with each other.

Several minor irritants, however, can add up to major problems and impede the smooth functioning of a planning board. Unfortunately, board members themselves often (sometimes unwittingly) trigger the problems by:

- regularly arriving at meetings late and/or leaving early.
- holding side conversations during the meeting.
- purporting to speak for the board as a whole, even when no official vote or stand has been taken.
- talking to each other and/or the public in rude or patronizing tones.
- expounding with a long-winded opinion on every subject.
- demanding excessive amounts of information.

If there were to be a diagnosis of the problems in all these circumstances, it is that this behavior shows the perpetrator either lacks respect for the other planning commissioners, the public, and for the process itself – or is uninformed about the norms of behavior at planning board meetings.

To avoid the latter, it is especially important that new members understand the planning process and how board meetings work. The director, chair, or a senior member, should meet informally with each new member to discuss these important matters. For more on this, see my column, “Teaching ‘New Dogs’ New

Tricks,” in *PCJ* #33 (Winter 1999).

Members who are chronically late arrivers or early leavers – or who make a habit of chatting or disrupting the meeting – are essentially saying that their business is more important than the board’s.

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Deal with this at first by giving the individual the benefit of the doubt, forgiving when this happens the first or even second time. However, the chair should alert the member to the problem. If it persists, begin each meeting on time (you should do that anyway), and do not stop the proceedings so that the chatterer or latecomer can catch up. Privately, the other commissioners should agree not to respond to side remarks, for it does take two to have a conversation. Public shaming, in the guise of impatiently waiting for the conversation to cease, much as our third grade teacher was wont to do, is a last resort.

Another group of irritants include commission members who speak out of turn; incorrectly purport to speak on behalf of the commission as a whole; or act in a rude or condescending manner. Often these individuals are indicating they need the limelight, no matter how much trouble it may cause. To counter that, develop (and enforce) ground rules. This can be done at periodic orientation sessions or by appointing a subcommittee to suggest rules of behavior for the entire group to discuss and adopt.

Each new set of officers may have to

make it clear to the media and to other municipal officials the individual who is the designated spokesperson. In some cases, it may be your planning director; in others, the chair. Regardless, the individual should speak for the commission only when you have taken official action. And it should almost go without saying that rudeness is never acceptable.

Then there are commissioners who have tedious opinions on every subject or who ask for additional information incessantly. After enduring this for a reasonable time, you have to be willing to move on. The chair, or some other member, can offer to paraphrase what has been said, or what the written record shows. Then, take action, even if that individual complains or abstains. Again, if the problem is with new members, be sure to meet with them to explain the process and see that they receive some basic training and orientation.

As we have noted, it is important to have rules, but not so onerous that they stifle discussion nor so lax that they permit unbridled misbehavior. Unless your charter demands it, do not follow Robert’s Rules of Order slavishly, nor allow anyone else to do so. Be reasonable and fair.

Commission business can be jeopardized when board members put themselves and their whims above those of the public or their fellow commissioners. You can right most difficult situations only if the rest of you agree on standards of conduct and stand firm and united when they are abused. ♦

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## On-Line Comments

“As a professional planning director and citizen planner, I have witnessed all of the behaviors mentioned in Elaine’s article. However, I have come to expect the unexpected in the planning forum, as the meetings are unrehearsed, the players are lay people, and the issues are often political and controversial. Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* should be required reading for all people involved with community planning.

– Frank Wash, *Alpine Township [CO] Planning Director & City of Coopersville Planning Commissioner*

“I would like to add a couple of additional ‘irritants’ from one who makes many presentations on behalf of clients in front of board members. They are:

1. Members who do not pay attention to the presentation being made or could care less and show it by their disinterest.
2. Members who do not have a grasp of or knowledge of the town’s regulations.
3. Members who get themselves assigned to boards as their own personal agenda to save the town (NIMBY) and limit development.”

– John Zyrilis, Jr., *East Haven, Connecticut*

“Please add the annoyance of commissioners (or applicants/staff) who do not turn off their cell phones. There is nothing more disruptive than to have a commissioner conduct a telephone conversation, or walk out of the room to take a call, while an applicant or the public is trying to present their points. It falls under the category of side conversations. It is disrespectful.”

– Michael Dove, *Director, Catawba County [North Carolina] Planning and Community Development*

“Some suggested ground rules...

- One person speaks at a time. Share the air time. Allow others to speak too
- Disagree openly without being disagreeable.
- All ideas have value. Honor each other’s perspectives.
- No personal attacks. Focus on issues, not each other.
- Listen to learn. Question to clarify and test assumptions.
- Keep the discussion focused.
- Honor time and task commitments.

- Work to ensure meeting progress and to ensure meeting agreements are met.”

– Philip J. Morneault, *Community Planner, USDA NRCS, Tolland, Connecticut*

“Another common irritant are those planning commissioners who (frequently) are not prepared for the meeting (e.g., haven’t read the packet; haven’t visited the subject sites).”

– Rick Marks, *Community Development Director, City of Foster City, California*

“About six months ago I was selected for a seat on the planning commission for a town with a population of about 350,000. Within four months I became a minor irritant which led to a major problem. At one informal meeting (the meeting prior to a public hearing) I managed, in part through my method of questioning, to get the chair to explode angrily in reaction to one of my questions. I was astonished I was able to cause such a reaction toward me, especially in a public meeting. And gave the situation much thought afterward.

I did not lack respect for the process. I lacked the knowledge on how the planning commission process works as it does, and why. Perhaps more importantly, I lacked the sensitivity of how my questions could be interpreted as being intrusive, unjustly challenging authority, and even condescending in tone. I lacked this knowledge and sensitivity for at least two reasons: (1) my Joe Average citizen perspective, with little understanding of the planning process itself, nor any business ties with economic development; and (2) an extremely brief planning commissioners orientation.

In hindsight, my being left to flounder on my own resulted in my asking questions to try to understand. Irritating questions to some after a while. Due to my ignorance, I had no background to ask good reasoned questions. And of course, when all else fails, I fell back on the dreaded ‘why is that’ over and over. My incessant questioning had to be aggravating to some, and hit the well-meaning, dedicated chair especially hard.

Newly appointed planning commissioners, especially those selected to represent the ordinary resident, need to be shown how the process works in order to head off misunderstandings and minor irritants.”

– V. Snider [Editor’s note: because of the personal nature of the above comments we are not listing the commentator’s home town.]