

What Counts Most as a Planning Commissioner?

by Elaine Cogan

Recently, I was asked by a group of planning board members from different parts of the country to name the three most important attributes of a commissioner. We had been talking about the need to understand planning terms; to be neutral and fair; to pay attention at meetings; and other such important matters. But when pressed to name the three most important aspects of their jobs, I surprised at least some of them by answering, “patience, persistence, and passion.”

Patience is an essential attribute if you are to be an effective decision maker, especially in the contentious situations that often confront the planning board. You need to exercise patience over your own desire to rush to judgment after a cursory review of the “facts” as they are presented by staff or an applicant, or seem to be borne out by your own experience. You also need to be patient with other board members who may have a different perspective or be slower to grasp complicated concepts.

Most importantly, you must be patient with the public at that inevitable public hearing or meeting. Though citizens often care deeply about a subject, they may become excited and emotional or express themselves in less than perfect grammar or syntax. This is not to excuse rude or disruptive behavior, which must, of course, be controlled. However, do not exhibit your impatience. Tapping a pencil on the desk, whispering to a neighbor, interrupting or answering rudely are common habits that should be avoided. Each citizen deserves to be heard with patience, no matter how misguided you may think they are.

Have patience with the planning process, and with the citizens to whom it is important, and you may be surprised how often the quality of your final product is improved.

Persistence is a second important trait of an effective planning commissioner. In

some ways, persistence may seem to be the reverse of patience, because it connotes a willingness to keep espousing a point of view despite opposition. But, whereas patience is a commodity that cannot be overused, persistence should be used sparingly. A commissioner who is stubborn and entrenched can quickly become ineffective. “We all know Joe. He never has an open mind on anything.” Thus, the board may hear you but not listen, because they believe you are not really listening to them.

However, there may be times when you have weighed all the information, listened patiently to the public, and come to a conclusion that still is not popular or supported by the majority. If your colleagues respect you, they will respect your persistence. You may even win them over.

We have talked about *passion* before in this column and it is applicable in the context of this discussion. In your striving to be dispassionate, that is, objective, fair, and open, it is easy to dismiss passion, but

they are not the same. Yes, you must always be an active listener to different points of view, but this should not mitigate having a real passion for planning as a vital contribution to your community’s livability and future.

Planning commissioners should be advocates for an orderly process that has the best interests of the community as its overriding goal. They also should be passionate about the values that make their community a special place.

This triad of traits – patience, persistence, and passion – can be the basis of a truly effective planning board member. ♦

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On-Line Comments

“I would certainly agree with the 3 P’s noted in the article – but would add another one – preparation. Too often I find members who have not taken the time to either drive by the site in question or even study the proposal, reports, surveys, or ordinances pertaining to the matter before the meeting.”

– Steve Furnivall, *Fulton County Plan Commission, Indiana*

“Along with the traits Elaine Cogan mentions, I would add 3 R’s: respect, represent, and relax. Without respect, we cannot have patient and active listening to the public’s comments. Representation is another fundamental element of our system. Planners and planning commissioners need to be advocates for the poor and powerless. And relax, and have a sense of humor. Sometimes a slight amount of humor can help in public meetings

to either break the ice, ease a tense situation, or shift the focus. However, humor needs to be used very strategically.”

– Son Cheong Kuan, *Transit Service Planner, Valley Transportation Authority, San Jose, California*

“I would agree that patience, persistence, and passion are important and very relevant when citizen planners are undertaking long-range community planning. However, when a planning commission is conducting quasi-judicial development reviews, it is important to note some other qualities: (1) an ability to understand the applicable laws; (2) impartiality and fairness in applying the law to the facts; (3) a willingness to follow and to base decisions upon the ‘rule of law,’ rather than on a personal or impassioned point of view; and (4) open-mindedness (which goes hand-in-hand with ‘patience’).”

– Gail Lawson, *Vermont League of Cities & Towns, Montpelier, VT*