

Is it Glitz? Is it Real?

by Elaine Cogan

It is midway through a rather routine planning board meeting. Until now, you have been considering issues that seem to be of more concern to technicians than to the public. Suddenly, you perk up. Next on the agenda is a presentation from an out-of-town developer, flanked by an articulate architect and well-connected local lawyers. After a few formalities, they turn on their electronic show and urge you to approve the plans for their proposed development – today. Wow! The streets never looked as attractive, the kids never happier, the sun never brighter as in their digitally-enhanced pictures. Their spreadsheets, pro formas, and other data also seem overwhelmingly positive.

We all can be susceptible to highly polished presentations; and unless applicants are blatant liars, they and their spokespeople should be expected to present their proposals in the best light. However, planning commissioners must meet the challenge of getting to the facts behind the pretty pictures and beyond the enticing words.

Trust your instincts. The color slides look good but ... there are no trees on the property today and those shown are 20 feet tall. Adding up the square footage of all the condos they expect, this seems to be a more dense development than their figures suggest. What will the project really look like next year or the year after? If their information appears to be incomplete or contrary to your knowledge or experience, speak up, and make sure your questions are answered satisfactorily before you act on the proposal.

Get a second opinion. If the project is complex and your staff does not have the expertise to answer all your questions, considering hiring a consultant for a neutral, professional review. It is worth the expense.

Take your time. Do not be pressured

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into making a precipitous decision even if the applicants earnestly plead for action now. They may say that their option on the property is running out or the financing is in jeopardy. Perhaps another community is begging them to locate there and yours needs more economic development. Resist the blandishments and threats. Your sole concern should be your community's interest, not theirs. None of these are reasons to make a decision ... either to approve or deny in haste. But neither is it fair to prolong the matter unduly. Be sure to visit the site, then ask your questions, get the answers, and be willing to make a decision.

Do not be intimidated by any side. Pressure to make a decision may come from the community as well as from the applicant. Opposing citizens may pack the meeting, wearing buttons or waving placards. They may disparage the applicant's claims and urge you to "just say no." They are as entitled to their say as is the applicant, but neither should force you to vote when you are not ready.

Rely on your colleagues. The most effective planning commission is comprised of people with a variety of interests and experiences. A developer may understand the real constraints an applicant may be facing versus the tall tales he may be telling; an architect can decipher plans better than most; a community activist may help you judge the depth of feeling about the proposal. Take advantage of your combined wisdom and experience by consulting with each other.

There are many ways applicants try to convince the planning board of the rightness of their proposals. Give them a polite audience, but be thorough in your evaluation. The word soon will get around that your planning board does its homework and does it well. ♦

Elaine Cogan is a partner in the Portland, Oregon, planning and communications firm of Cogan Owens Cogan. Elaine recently managed her firm's work on "Clackamas County Complete Communities," an ambitious effort to develop a sense of community and common purpose among citizens in all the rural, urban, and suburban areas of this large county in the Portland metropolitan area. This project is slated to receive a national award from the American Planning Association this Spring.



On-Line Comment

"Elaine Cogan's article highlights the difference between rational and peripheral evaluation. Commissioners engaging in rational evaluation carefully consider the facts and arguments, assess the reasoning, and then reach a logical conclusion about the merits of the project. Rather than risk information overload, however, many people engage in peripheral evaluation, looking at external factors such as whether the speaker is likable or the presentation is impressive to decide whether to reject or accept the assertions being made. One of the most dangerous peripheral conclusions for a commissioner to reach: presuming that since 'everyone' seems to hate the proposed development, it must be a bad project. Reliance on 'social proof' instead of rational proof about a project's merits is a trap too many commissioners fall into, and Elaine reminds us of the importance of logical, rational evaluation of land use proposals."

– Debra H. Stein, President, GCA Strategies, San Francisco