

Linking Elected Officials with Planning

by Michael Chandler

Three years ago I wrote an article entitled “The Planning Universe: A Quick Tour.” *PCJ* #35 (Summer 1999). The goal of that article was the identification of key participants in the planning process. Included in the galaxy of players was the local governing body. I suggested the governing body’s connection to planning centered on three key events: (1) the appointment of the planning commission; (2) the adoption of a comprehensive plan; and (3) the administration of zoning ordinances, subdivision ordinances, and other regulations designed to bring the comprehensive plan to life.

The aim of this article is to examine in greater detail the role elected officials play in the planning process and the value and importance planners and planning commissioners should associate with elected officials. First, however, allow me to briefly revisit the role of planners and planning commissioners.

Planners and Planning Commissioners

Staff planners wear several different hats. They function as creative visionaries helping set out possibilities for their community’s future. At the same time, they advocate on behalf of citizens faced with here-and-now problems. In their “convener” role, they coordinate multiple goals, objectives, and policies in an environment featuring competing interests and values. Of course, they also handle the daily grist of reviewing development proposals, responding to requests for information, and doing the hundred-and-one tasks that planning offices are responsible for.

Planning commissioners also wear several hats. They often serve as a sounding board for the community, listening to ideas (and complaints) about a range of neighborhood and citywide or countywide issues. Commissioners also act as consensus-builders, involving the public

in the discussion and resolution of land use issues – a job often done through the process of preparing or updating the comprehensive plan. In many states, planning commissioners also wear the hat of decision maker when acting on proposed subdivisions and other developments.

Elected Officials

Elected officials serving on the local governing body also perform multiple roles in the planning process. Because the governing body controls local purse strings, it directly influences the size and scope of the local planning program. Elected officials also function as decision makers when adopting changes to land use ordinances, and when allocating funds for infrastructure improvements and other projects. In some states, local governing bodies also have final say on development approvals.

More broadly, governing bodies have a critical role in setting the community’s agenda. Given the importance of the comprehensive plan in identifying community goals and objectives – and how these will be accomplished – it makes sense for the governing body to be more than a mere spectator to the comprehensive planning process. This involvement, ideally, will translate into a sense of ownership and commitment to the plans and ordinances that result from this process.

Why Engage the Elected Official?

Despite the above, I know that maintaining elected official involvement in the community planning process is often a challenge. But it can be done!

In Blacksburg, Virginia, our town council (on which I’ve served for the past eighteen years) regularly relies on the comprehensive plan in decision making. As a result, we have been able to minimize the extent to which selected courses of action have been taken in response to emotion and rhetoric – and maximize actions taken which support identified

community goals and policies. This has been possible because our plan relates consequences to actions. Properly done, a solid plan can provide context, background, and an articulated basis for choosing certain courses of action.

Through its reliance on the town plan, our town council also sends a clear message to the community as a whole: planning counts.

Engagement Strategies

Although not mandated by code, most planning commissions would do themselves a huge favor if they invested the time to engage their local officials in planning. There are a variety of strategies a commission can use to enhance its working relationship with the governing body. Some of the more successful approaches include:

1. *Planning Commission Annual Report.* A report documenting planning commission activities, and providing an overview of local planning issues and challenges, should be prepared annually and shared with the governing body. In some localities the report also contains the commission’s work plan for the coming year. If possible, have the report hand delivered by the commission chair at a regular meeting of the governing body, perhaps with a short accompanying oral presentation.

2. *Joint Work Sessions.* It makes sense for the planning commission and the local governing body to meet at least once a year to discuss matters involving planning, land use, and community change management issues. A working dinner is a common approach. To avoid being haphazard and disjointed, an agenda should be developed and followed.

3. *Joint Visioning Exercise.* Another useful engagement strategy, especially if your locality is preparing or updating its comprehensive plan, is a joint visioning exercise. By including the governing body

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in the actual planning process, especially at an early stage, the commission can incorporate the governing body's perspective and concerns. This will reduce the chances of being "blind-sided" by critical comments at the end of the process. *Note: for more on visioning, see Mike Chandler's "Putting Vision in Our Plan," PCJ #21 (available for downloading at: <www.plannersweb.com>).*

4. *Governing Body Member Serving on the Commission.* This strategy can produce exciting results. The first step involves a search of your enabling statutes to see if it's permissible for a member of the local governing body to also serve, with voting rights, on the planning commission. If such an appointment can be made, strong consideration should be given to exercising this option. Our experience with this approach in Blacksburg has been quite positive, especially from the perspective of communication, mutual understanding, and respect. *See Editor's Note, "Come and Visit."* ♦

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Editor's Note: Come and Visit

A less formal alternative to Mike Chandler's suggestion is to encourage governing body members to attend planning commission meetings. During my years as a member of the Burlington, Vermont, Planning Commission, city council members often attended our meetings, especially when projects or issues affecting their district were being discussed. We also had one longtime city councilor who was a frequent visitor at commission meetings. This proved quite useful as we were often able to get a quick feel for issues that would likely be of concern to the council, as well as procedural advice on how to best deal with the council and its committees.