

# Does Your Planning Board Reflect Your Community?

by Elaine Cogan

**WANTED:** Citizens who have an interest in non-paying service for the betterment of our community. Ability to understand laws and regulations pertaining to zoning, annexation, environmental, aesthetic, and other concerns that affect our physical growth and development. Willingness to sit through long meetings with patience and forbearance and to make decisions fairly and objectively.

These are just a few attributes of the ideal planning commissioner. Some communities, including the City of Lafayette, Colorado have written job descriptions for the position. In Lafayette, it is a two-page document that is notable for its completeness and honesty. For example, most readers probably would agree with the statement, "This position requires a lengthy attention span and involves intermittently sitting (90%), walking (5%), and standing (5%)." The latter presumably occurs when you have the need to stretch or find a way to exercise your fatigued limbs during an especially tedious session. The walking may be needed if you are visiting a site; we hope it does not include pacing impatiently when you should be sitting and/or standing respectfully.

While attempting to put all the requirements of a planning board member in writing is admirable, it may deter some people from applying even as it interests others. For example, developers, architects, engineers, building contractors, and others who regularly deal with land use issues are likely candidates for the planning commission. In fact, at least some members of these professions are probably already included on the commission. Planning staffs are comfortable with them; they "speak the language" or can learn readily, and would not be overwhelmed by complicated site or development plans.

However well these people may fit into a typical planning commissioner's role, the picture is incomplete if these are the only

types of people on your board. You make decisions that affect shopkeepers, farmers, environmentalists, racial and ethnic minorities, newcomers and old timers – in other words, the diverse population that makes your community unique. They, also, should be sought out to be commission members.

In many communities, planning staff or commissioners recommend likely candidates for appointment by the town or city council. Use your influence to recruit people who are not ordinarily considered. It may not be easy to find willing candidates who are not part of the unofficial planning community or may even have had a negative experience with a planning issue. Still, they also live and work in your community and deserve consideration for a seat on the planning board.

The first step in opening up the commission to new people is to make a list of all the interests in your community. Be inclusive and creative, looking beyond the obvious. You should take every opportunity to seek out people from the constituencies you have listed. Do not be satisfied with posting a job description in the local newspaper. Be proactive. Contact the radio and print media that communicate with under-represented constituencies; send notices to the newsletters of their clubs and organizations; follow up with letters and phone calls. Seek out leaders who may be willing to be on the planning commission themselves or can recommend likely candidates.

While reaching out broadly, you may need to be sensitive to time commitments and other special needs. For example, you may have to consider altering your meeting times to accommodate hourly workers or people with young children at home. Do not expect everyone you consider to have in-depth knowledge of planning

issues, but favor those who are willing to commit the time to learn.

After you experience the value a diversity of interests can bring to planning issues ... the points of view they espouse you may not have been aware of ... the benefits of being able to show citizens that the faces on your planning board are as heterogeneous as your community ... you will find that the results are worth the extra effort. ♦

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## Editor's Note:

### Developing a "Farm Team"

Just as major league ball clubs develop future prospects through their "farm teams," your planning commission might want to consider ways of educating planning commissioners of tomorrow in the ways of planning. One approach is to hold workshops, perhaps annually, on planning and zoning basics open to all members of the community. This can provide an effective way of reducing the "fear factor" many citizens have when it comes to the planning process. It can also have the fringe benefit of generating a constituency of community members who understand the benefits sound planning can bring to the community – and will support local planning efforts. For more on one approach to this, see Mike Chandler's "Citizen Planning Academies," in *PCJ* #29 (available for downloading at: [www.plannersweb.com](http://www.plannersweb.com)).