

# When Labels Can Be Counter-Productive

by Elaine Cogan

Several times I have written in this column about the importance of having diverse interests represented on the planning board. Too many communities, for too long, have accepted the white male as the epitome of people asked to serve. In truth, in many instances, they have been the bulwark of the community, leading chambers of commerce and business and commercial interests. Yet, many other people have not even been considered.

It is a credit to many in the waning years of the last century and into this one, that as the appointing city councils and others have become more diverse, so have their candidates for boards and commissions. Now that this trend appears to be well established in many communities, it appears worthwhile to ask, to what avail? Can we go overboard in insisting that people represent “slots” or characteristics? In some instances can this be counter-productive?

Consider the label, *environmentalist*. It connotes so many different emotions and attitudes. Lumber company owners who

follow careful and selective tree-cutting practices often consider themselves such, as would those who lash themselves to those trees to keep any from being cut down. In every community, there are streams, wetlands, and other features that dot the environment. Some people belong to environmental protection

CAN WE GO OVERBOARD IN INSISTING THAT PEOPLE REPRESENT “SLOTS” OR CHARACTERISTICS?

groups, while others advocate passionately for a particular situation. If you have one place on the planning commission reserved for an *environmentalist*, who would be your choice?

The label *developer* also can be less than clear. Is it preferable to choose the “small” *developer* who builds single or modest homes here and there in the community or the “large” *developer* who has changed the skyline of your town? Should the *developer* also be a *land owner* or are these separate and distinct interests? Should both be represented on the board?

What about *ethnic diversity*? Who speaks for the differing populations in your community, and how do you know that they do? Or is it enough that the individual herself is of a minority culture or a self-appointed spokesperson?

It is not even that easy to decide among those who call themselves *planners*, *architects*, or *engineers*. If they have a seat at the commission table, should they be licensed to practice their professions or is it enough that they give themselves these labels? Who is more desirable: someone who has been critical of recent planning decisions or another who is generally supportive?

You might also consider *age*. Young people can lend a unique and valuable perspective despite having few “bona fide” credentials. Seniors also can offer special insights based on their longstanding familiarity with the community and its issues.

In deciding who should be a member of the planning commission, the only characteristic we can be certain about is gender, and here, diversity is certainly to be desired. But should a *white female engineer* trump a *black male land developer*?

It finally becomes a matter of community values, with perhaps the overriding value one of commitment. New and ongoing planning board members should be committed to planning as an orderly and unique way of making decisions, and not favor ad hoc decision-making that cannot be justified by any such standard. They should also be committed to giving their time ... to reading materials, attending most if not all meetings, and participating fully in the planning process.

Many times, planning board members participate in the appointment process by suggesting people for vacancies or even taking part in interviewing them. There should be no reluctance to ascertaining such commitment and considering all these factors while you strive for the true diversity of opinion and character that will best represent your community. ♦

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*Editor's Note:* Four years ago we surveyed readers about the composition of their planning boards. While not done as a formal, statistically valid survey, the results nevertheless provided an interesting overview of the makeup of planning commissions. You can view a summary of the results on our web site at: <[www.plannersweb.com/2002\\_survey.html](http://www.plannersweb.com/2002_survey.html)>.





## Responses to Elaine Cogan's Column

"In our city of about 30,000, more important than gender, ethnic diversity, or occupation is the individual's willingness to serve. We want people who are dedicated to the long-term health and vitality of our city and people who do not have a personal agenda they bring to the commission. We do consider geography to some extent and try to have different sections of the city represented. But just finding people willing to soak in presentations and debate until late in the night with little if any compensation is tough enough without making a long list of requirements."

– Joyce Griffith, Caldwell, Idaho

"We consider all interested people. Gender/ethnicity is not a primary goal, but we work hard to achieve a 'balanced' planning commission. We do not want the 'faces' on the commissions to be clones of each other. If we have an opportunity to appoint someone with related skills (i.e. architects, businessmen, other professionals) we strongly consider them. Unfortunately, we are sometimes faced with applicants who are biased or have an agenda.

In order to have an effective body, we believe that diversity in all areas should be a goal. More importantly, we work hard to achieve a balance of people who have served long term and new faces who are willing to serve and learn."

– Larry Gould, Derby, Kansas

"In Dearborn County, Indiana, we have an Advisory Plan Commission of nine members. Four are there by virtue of their office – a commissioner, a councilman, the county surveyor, and the county extension agent. The other five members are citizen members. By law the board has to be fairly evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats.

The biggest issue is getting someone with an interest in planning and taking the time to research the proposed developments and think about the areas in question. If the county were more diverse, race or ethnicity might be need to be considered. Right now, we are largely white middle class."

– Christine Mueller, Lawrenceburg, Indiana

"In my experience in Pinellas County, Florida, there has been no conscious effort to place specific types of people on planning boards. I agree with Elaine Cogan that commitment is very important. Planning board members should learn the codes and laws in effect within their community. They should also appreciate the role they have to play in the development process. Then, when deciding a case, what they have learned should be the foundation upon which their decisions are made, not personal bias or preference.

Board members that do not practice impartiali-

ty are their own worst enemies and their ill-founded decisions can cause significant harm, not only to applicants, but to the jurisdictions they serve."

– Larry Pflueger, Pinellas Planning Council, Clearwater, Florida

"We should seek individuals with open minds, analytical skills, willingness to learn, pragmatic decision-making skills ... people who care about community in the largest sense, who don't have axes to grind, who won't find themselves in constant conflicts of interest, and who are good listeners and thinkers.

We need people who can debate well without bringing their egos into their arguments; who do their homework, make their best case, work toward sound decision-making, and then let it go. People who respect a team effort, who understand each other's needs, and work together with board members and staff as partners in service to our communities.

These skills do not lend themselves neatly into boxes such as environmentalist, developer, or engineer; nor into racial or ethnic categories. Seeking diversity for its own sake is like a chef reaching into the pantry and blending varied spices into a recipe just because they're different."

– Lee Krohn, AICP, Planning Director, Town of Manchester, Vermont

"I think the most important point in Elaine's article is the issue of 'commitment.' Planning is hard; and uses an arcane language and complex concepts – spread over with a veneer of legalisms.

In Wichita, a Metropolitan Area Planning Commission member must go through reams of paper, and attend numerous long meetings. This tends to scare off your 'average' citizen (I estimate I spend 20 to 30 hours a month on MAPC work).

To succeed in having a planning organization that truly reflects the surrounding citizenry, three things would have to be in place: (1) a commitment to make urban planning issues more accessible to the general public (in Wichita, the commission meets only during business hours in City Hall downtown); (2) the dedication to provide education and training to those citizens who do step up to serve on a planning organization; and (3) elected officials who make a concerted effort to identify and encourage citizens who will serve. That encouragement is crucial since it takes several months for a new commissioner to begin to feel confident in dealing with so many planning issues."

– Elizabeth Bishop, Wichita, Kansas

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\*These are a sampling of replies (reprinted with permission) to Elaine Cogan's draft column. They come from individuals who have volunteered to receive and review draft articles scheduled for publication in the *Planning Commissioners Journal*. For more information on participating in our article review process, go to: <[www.plannersweb.com/updates.html](http://www.plannersweb.com/updates.html)>.