

When Major Players Come to Bat

by Elaine Cogan

Every city has “major players” who have considerable impacts on the community and the local economy. They include large companies or institutions such as hospitals or schools. They usually become visible only when they have their own grand plans... and are more likely to want to write their own rules than adhere to seemingly arbitrary local processes. Often, their CEOs or board members are tied closely to the social and/or political power structure and consider themselves and their entities good citizens.

Yet, these same institutions or large businesses may be planning an expansion that would severely affect a low-income neighborhood, or require additional roadways or transportation links the community cannot afford. How can planners and planning board members work with these major players in a way that is fair and equitable to them and still serves the best interests of the entire community?

Your job as a guardian of sound planning is more difficult if your first contact or awareness occurs when representatives unveil their big ideas to the city council or the media. This approach, especially if it denies or ignores the careful tenets in the comprehensive plan or zoning code, may give them leverage while it immediately puts you on the defensive.

To be most effective dealing with major players, lay the groundwork for cooperation and collaboration far in advance. Of utmost importance is that the commission members are well-connected to the entire community. Without even a hint of bias or favoritism, while talking the same language as all their constituents, they should lessen the risk of being perceived by the major players as do-gooders who really do not under-

stand the “bottom line” or what they consider their special needs. Not every commissioner can have ties to all these parties, but it is valuable if at least some of you have these relationships. This makes possible the informal connections through which many disputes or conflicts can be ameliorated before they become major conflagrations.

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Use these informal networks to find out about their long-range plans and ideas to see how well they complement your community’s vision for its future. Once a specific project is developed, however, remember you are precluded from having any “ex-parte” communications if, as a planning commissioner, you may have a role in its review or approval. However, your staff is not constrained in this same way, and should examine preliminary proposals and apprise applicants of any planning restrictions with which they are expected to comply. Most major players want to avoid conflict and many compromises can be agreed to in such informal settings. Planning staff can share information with you and ascertain the areas of agreement or disagreement. Moreover, they can show good will by going to the proposer’s site rather than requiring them to bring bulky plans to their office.

It also is important to check in regularly with the elected body that appointed you. Be familiar with their sources of support and any campaign promises they may have made. Your job as planners is

made more difficult if some of the officials seem overly familiar with these major players. However, you should be aware of where they may stand if the conflicts get on their agenda so that you can craft a well-reasoned response.

Look for common needs or aspirations. The leaders of an expanding institution or business may think their only solution to accommodating many new employees is a new four-lane road, while you can show them how existing roadways can be improved and still serve their needs. Alternative forms of transportation such as carpools and additional public transit also can be discussed. They may be absolutely convinced they require acres of surface parking and hence, much land, when shared spaces with an adjacent entity or parking structures may be reasonable alternatives. They are not likely to relish the possibility of adverse publicity and appreciate being apprised that their plans would severely affect an activist, low-income neighborhood, especially if you suggest other configurations to avoid or accommodate the problem.

While you should strive to keep the controversies to a minimum, there are times you need to say “no.” However, if you can say, “no, but” and work together to reach reasonable compromises, everyone can be a winner. ♦

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