

Chairing the Planning Commission

by Carol J. Whitlock

Planning commissions come in all sizes. There are small ones and large ones and each seems to have its own set of bylaws and methods of operation. But they all have one thing in common. They all have a chairperson.

For some planning commissions the chairperson is elected by members of the commission for only a single term of one or two years; some allow additional terms; while others have a rotation system where every commissioner eventually becomes chairperson.

The first thing to remember as a planning commission member and potential chairperson is that being a wonderfully effective member does not mean you will make a wonderfully effective chairperson. This article addresses those who are less than confident about their abilities to chair meetings.

For most planning commissions the major responsibility of the chairperson is the conduct and control of each meeting. Sounds very simple until you throw into the mix that this requires working with not only your fellow planning commission members, but the general public,

operators, lawyers, etc. – who have their own agenda as well. Conducting *and controlling* the meeting can be a challenge.

The most important thing to remember as chairperson is that it is your goal to be fair to everyone – regardless of whether you agree or disagree with them. Here are a few simple ideas to help with meeting that goal. For the usual, routine items on the agenda these will help, but won't really come into play as life savers for the chairperson until the "hot" topics show up.

- *Always be fair.* This is perhaps the most important responsibility of the chairperson. Remember it is your job to give everyone their "day in court," not to decide who is right or wrong. (You will do that also, but outside of your job as chairman).

Many planning commissions begin hearings with staff comments and an overview of the project, followed by a

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many of whom are there because they are: (1) totally in the dark about some project planned for their neighborhood, (2) mildly unhappy with what is being proposed, or (3) up in arms about what is going on. Then you throw into the mix the applicant and professionals – devel-



Online Comments

“It is very important to explain the process and what role the commission and the public have prior to each hearing on each item. This sets the expectation of what can be achieved ... If it is an administrative item versus legislative the public should know the scope of their ability to give input.”

– Meg Ryan, *Planning Consultant, Utah League of Cities and Towns*

“I have been on the BZA and the Planning and Zoning Commission 28 years (at the end of this current term) with 95 percent of that time as chairman. I have experienced a lot of what Carol writes about in this article and it's a good feeling for me to know that I am on the same page with her.”

– Richard L. Snyder Sr., *Planning and Zoning Commission Chairman, West Jefferson, Ohio*

“Carol's article certainly is a good guide for all chairpersons. ... it is essential to set the 'ground rules' up front ... Having time limits on public comment is unfortunate, but necessary,

in order to properly manage meetings that sometimes go well into the wee hours. I also think that a reminder should be given for commenters not to repeat what someone else has said. Allow them to concur verbally, but not repeat. Also, for certain groups such as home associations, it is often effective if a spokesperson representing the entire group can deliver the thoughts for everyone by allowing the spokesperson an extended amount of time. One good speaker for ten minutes may be better than 20 people speaking for two hours. And, in this way, their message is more succinct and easier to follow.”

– Larry Frey, *AICP, Bradenton, Florida*

“To keep comments germane, the chair also should remind the public (and commissioners, if needed) about standards of review for the case under discussion, for example, 'consistency and compatibility with the comprehensive plan,' 'meeting standards of zoning ordinance.' ... One other thing that isn't specifically within the scope of the article, but that affects the tone and productivity of meetings a lot, is the public's ability to access information relevant to the

hearings, like staff reports and hearing notices, in advance.”

– Alissa Barber Torres, *AICP, Chief Planner Research and Strategic Planning Section Orange County [Florida] Planning Division*

“There is more that a Chairman can do that effects the conduct of the meeting. Making sure all commissioners do their homework before the meeting is one. Unless they have studied the application beforehand ... the commissioners will either spend a lot of time at the meeting unnecessarily or miss some very significant points that should be considered. It will certainly allow them to ask more intelligent and informative questions. I am especially concerned that the commissioner representing the district in question is fully knowledgeable about the application. ... Another item affecting the meeting and even the long term outcome of the vote, is ensuring that the commissioners have a full understanding of what can and cannot be considered or voiced at the meeting.”

– Allan Slovin, *Chairman, Town of Braselton [Georgia] Planning Commission*

presentation by the applicant. After that, it's usually the public's turn to weigh in.

If it looks like there are large numbers of people wishing to speak, or if the applicant or his or her representatives indicate they have a lot to cover, set a time limit. The important thing is to set it at the start of the meeting and then stick to it for everyone. Be reasonable. Most citizens can say what they have to say in 5-10 minutes, applicants can generally describe and discuss the most complex project in 30 minutes. Additionally, let everyone know that there will be a "one to a customer" rule. That is, say everything you have to say in your first, and only, time to speak.

Often citizens try to bypass the chairperson and ask questions directly of the applicant, his lawyer, or other representative. Don't allow this. Have the applicant or his representative respond to all questions at the end of the public input part of the meeting. This will help prevent back and forth discussions that often become arguments.

• *Do not allow the audience to break in when someone else has the floor.* If patiently telling members of the public to wait their turn doesn't work, stop the meeting and let everyone sit and stew until it comes back under control. No need to yell, pound the gavel, or demand control. Things will settle down if all business stops until peace reigns. Only one time have I ever had to threaten to get the police to clear the room and that was because of one totally irrational gentleman who settled down after the threat/promise of police intervention.

• *Patiently listen until every person who wishes to speak has had their say.* This is where the time limit comes in to help you out. But more importantly, if everyone understands that they will be heard, they are much more apt to sit patiently and not disrupt the meeting.

• *Develop a good working relationship with your planning director (or whoever is your key staff support person).* This is vital. In my years' of experience as chairperson, I have also found that meeting with our planning director before each public meeting has strengthened our relationship, while providing me with a heads up about any unique or "hot" items on the agenda.

• *Discuss issues with respect.* Another important aspect of conducting and controlling a meeting is the way the planning commission handles its own discussions.

I have been lucky to have fellow planning commissioners who respect each other's opinions. Should you have a problem of lack of respect among members, remember it isn't your place to correct the planning commission member, just control the meeting. Your only recourse is to stop the meeting until everyone cools down (call a 10-minute recess) and then take up again. Should the problem persist, rectifying it is up to the mayor, city administrator, or someone else at that level.

The suggestions I have set out are basic, common sense actions for running a meeting. But if you have not been on the gavel side of the table before, maybe they will help a bit. And if you have been there, perhaps they will add to what you have already learned and help you out in the future. ♦

Carol J. Whitlock is a registered professional engineer. She currently chairs both the Merriam, Kansas, and the Johnson County, Kansas, Planning Commissions. Carol has served on the Merriam Planning Commission for over 20 years, including 17 years as chairperson, and has served on the Johnson County Planning Commission for 12 years, chairing it for 8 years.

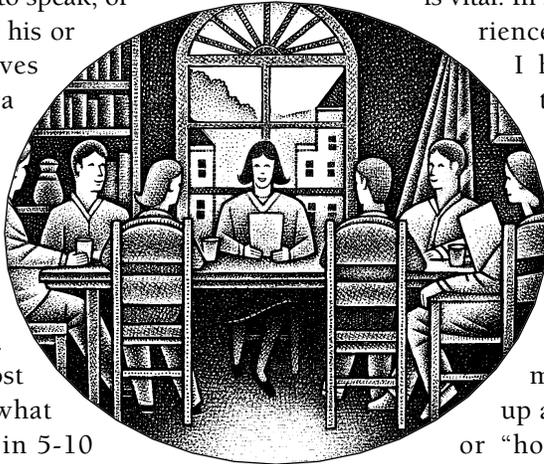


ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL HOFFMAN

From a Staff Perspective

by Lee Krohn, AICP

Carol's column covers interesting and helpful strategies for being an effective Board chair and for running effective meetings. One of her suggestions, to meet with your community's planning director (or appropriate staff person) before each meeting, is excellent. Let me add some thoughts on this from a staff perspective.

This kind of pre-meeting or pre-hearing discussion allows us to create appropriate and effective strategies as needed for each matter and for the overall meeting. Let me be clear: we do not seek predetermined outcomes on cases. What we try to do is build a shared understanding about which cases will be more complex; what key questions or issues are likely to come up; and how to deal with potential questions of law, procedure, or process.

It also helps that the chairs of our various boards (and we have several citizen boards in addition to the planning commission) have me right at their side during hearings. Everyone knows that I am not a board member, nor can I vote; however, this close proximity allow us to confer as needed on key questions or issues, while maintaining a smooth flow of discussion for each case. It also demonstrates, both literally and figuratively, that staff and board collaborate as a team on behalf of our community.

There are many more pieces of this puzzle than can be covered here. I hope this is a helpful beginning, and helps to stimulate thoughtful consideration about the dynamics of public service in the land use arena. While it may not feel this way in the heat of a contested matter, how we approach our work, and the behavior we offer by example, does make a difference. Let us all seek to do this important work together within a context of trust, care, and mutual respect.

Lee Krohn has served in many capacities (often concurrently) for the Town of Manchester, Vermont, since 1989, including Planning Director, Zoning Administrator, Tree Warden, E-911 Coordinator, and Interim Town Manager. He has also served from "the other side" as Chair of the Putney, Vermont Planning Commission.