We create models of the world to understand how things work and to predict how they will work in the future. The better our model; the better our ability to forecast and shape the future.

Models that are universally accepted are paradigms. There is a significant paradigm shift occurring in physics—the science that deals with matter, energy, motion, and force—that has a direct correlation to planning commissions.

The Renaissance saw the creation of a new model of the universe which has an analogy to a watch: the world is comprised of millions of parts that collectively form a working mechanism. This analogy is often used in describing the need for species protection. If a critical part is removed, the entire mechanism stops.

A newer model is replacing this mechanical view. It focuses on the relationships between parts and not the parts themselves. It views nature as a series of systems. An analogy often drawn is to the “Butterfly Effect,” first postulated by Edward Lorenz, which describes how a seemingly insignificant action—like the beating of a butterfly’s wings in one place—can trigger an unexpected chain of events—perhaps resulting in a tornado in another part of the world.

Whew! But now it’s time to stretch our minds even further, and consider how these two different models—the mechanical model and the systems model—relate to public bodies, such as planning commissions.

Several years ago planner Frank Wein suggested tongue-in-cheek that most public hearing bodies followed the “Rule of Five.” They were comprised of five distinct personalities:

The Reader: Reads everything, understands nothing. Comments often like: “On page 32, second paragraph, I believe you meant a colon and not a semi colon. Also, on page 45, third line from the bottom, I believe it should read ‘effect’ and not ‘affect.’ Just some of my thoughts about the report.”

The Sleeper: One of the highest attendance records. Responds to roll-call, “Here,” but that may be the last sound from this member for the entire meeting.

The Stepping Stone: “Today the city council, tomorrow the board of supervisors, then state senate, then maybe even Congress.”

The Do-Gooder: Believes that government is here to help all of us. A believer in JFK’s adage: Ask what you can do for your government (and, then, do it).

The Paranoid: The opposite of the do-gooder. Believes he/she has to be in government or else they’ll screw you.

This humorous view of public bodies is a mechanical model—there are five distinct parts that will work together in a highly predictable manner. While the mechanical model offers one way to understand and predict commission behavior, a systems model is better. Public hearing decision-making, in practice, is much more dependent on the relationships between the players and issues.

Here are five interconnected examples of how a planning commission operates as a system:

**Decision Dynamics:** This is the interplay between people and the planning commission and how that affects hearing procedures and outcomes. The collective “personality” of the commission is not the sum of its parts, but how they interact. Planning commissions are constantly changing, growing and evolving.

**Mentor/Apprentice:** This is the maturation of an individual member’s participation on the Commission. Many relationships are based on commission tenure with senior members providing guidance and mentorship.

**Alliances, Blocs, Factions:** This is the natural tendency for commissioners to align themselves to others with similar interests and values. These have a profound effect on decision-making as there is a strong social need to create and preserve these relationships.

**McGuiffs:** From the Alfred Hitchcock concept of a movie element that is the focus of the plot, but has no significance. These are like the butterfly wing beats that may have catastrophic results. I have seen community projects succumb to such McGuiffs as lawn ornaments, crowing fowl, and bollards.

**Timing:** A systems view includes the dimension of time. The order of presentation, the sequence of events, and all the aspects of time are critical to planning commission decision-making. As I have written before, timing is not just important, it is everything.

Ours is not a clockwork universe, but a complex system affected by the cumulative effects of myriads of “butterfly wings.” An understanding of these models will help not only understand and predict planning commission decisions, but shape them. ♦

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