

Different Perspectives

by Ric Stephens

Have you ever read transcripts from a hearing and thought “Did I say that?” Or ever heard an audio recording of a hearing and thought “Is that what I sound like?” Well, you will not be surprised if you see a video of your planning commission hearing and wonder “Is that what I look like?” Transcripts and audio/visual records ARE how others see and hear us.

About two decades ago, I served on a planning commission where the City Clerk took minutes then carefully edited them before submitting them for approval. She made us all look erudite whether or not we knew what that meant. Today, I serve on a commission that digitally records each hearing for website access. Each commissioner has his or her own micro-headset, and several cameras capture the group and individuals. I’m told the microphones are sensitive enough to hear us breathing, let alone sighing or muttering.

So what does this mean? More than ever it is imperative that we consider what we say, and how we say it. A look, a gesture, or a rude comment was never appropriate, but now the odds are higher they can jeopardize the commission’s credibility.

If your community makes audio and/or video recordings, it is vital that you occasionally listen and watch to see how you and your colleagues appear as a team and individually. You might even wonder “Is that really what we sound/look like?” As an individual, you may learn that using the term “dude” to refer to someone is a tad too informal, or that wearing a pin-stripe blouse or shirt results in wavy patterns when viewed on a television screen. The odds are you’ll become aware of something in your own manner worth changing or improving on.

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Similarly, it can be eye-opening to occasionally watch your commission “live” from the audience, so to speak. There may be two opportunities for this. First, you have arrived unavoidably late, and it would be less disruptive to sit through the item already under way in the back of the room. Second, in situations where you must recuse yourself, it might be alright to sit in the back of the room (but check with your planning staff or city attorney first).

Another extremely valuable exercise, if you can find the time, is to attend a planning commission hearing in another community. Like fingerprints, no two planning commissions run meetings or hearings the exact same way. You may be surprised at both the similarities and the differences you discover, and you may observe patterns of behavior that promote (or inhibit) better group dynamics and decision-making.

It can also be helpful to invite someone to evaluate your commission’s meeting dynamics. This could be someone from another planning commission or someone with expertise in a field such as public relations, corporate management, or even customer service.

One more way of gaining insights: try putting yourself in the shoes of someone attending your meeting, someone with a different background or characteristics than your own. How would you view your commission if you were attending as a local businessperson, a senior citizen, a twenty-something ...?

Would you be able to understand what was happening at the meeting? Would you be put off by jargon being used or by unexplained procedural steps?

Years ago I taught an advanced planning studio where I took students to public hearings to observe the decision-making dynamics. I then asked them to role-play different points of view in class. They gained insights from trying look at things from another’s perspective.

Many planning commissions have “speaker’s cards” that must be filled out for meeting records. Consider having survey/comment cards available as well to find out how the public views the hearing process.

Going a step further, a commission could employ the “Plus/Delta” evaluation technique for continuous improvement. In brief, at the conclusion of a meeting or hearing, the commission identifies the positive aspects (pluses) of the meeting/hearing and considers how to continue and enhance these elements. The commission also reviews areas needing improvement (deltas) and determines what changes should be made. This process can be very informal or highly structured with a focus group.

There are many approaches to improving commissions, and striving to see ourselves from other points of view is a very good start. As Henry Ford once said, “if there is any one secret of success, it lies in the ability to get the other person’s point of view and see things from that person’s angle as well as from your own.” ♦

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