

Ten Things to Avoid

by Ric Stephens

Having spent years working with planning commissions – and serving on them as well – my radar is tuned to the dynamics of meetings, and how commissioners “behave” when dealing with the public and with staff. I’ve seen commissions succumb to glitzy presentations; engage in undue delay; or lose sight of the big picture while getting sidetracked on what may not be all that important.

As an example of this last point, years ago I attended a planning commission meeting that spent an entire evening discussing lawn ornaments such as pink plastic flamingos for a multi-million-dollar resort. As I looked at the planning director’s expression, I had to wonder if behind that Mona Lisa smile there was this little voice saying “So this is the result of hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars of planning, coordination, and negotiation?”

Allow me to spend a few minutes sharing my thoughts on ten things planning commissions should avoid. I’m sure many of you will have your own additions. But what’s most important is to be aware of how we may fall short, and do our best to improve how we run our meetings and deal with others.

1. Familiar Informality. Although it may seem desirable to conduct hearings in a casual style, addressing participants with familiar terms – endearing or derogatory – undermines the perception and practice of impartial decision-making.

2. Crude, Lewd, and/or Rude. Inappropriate behaviors cover the spectrum of human activity. As someone who has collected humorous public hearing stories, I have heard and seen a range of planning commissioner behavior from snoozing to brawling. It can be hoped that the increase in videotaping may reduce some of these lapses in the social graces.

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3. Labeling. This is an insidious problem that may manifest itself as labeling individuals or over-identifying with them. Do we discount comments from those we label as “environmentalists” or “developers,” instead of listening to what they actually have to say? Do we give more weight to those who seem most like us in how they look or the neighborhood they come from?

4. Decision Delay. A planning commission is expected to render decisions in a timely manner. Some applications suffer “death by a thousand nicks,” the continuous request for relatively insignificant changes. This is related to “death by a thousand days” which is the continuation of projects like a soap opera. Try your best not to regularly engage in delay tactics.

5. Ready or Not. It is a running joke to hear about commissioners who open their packet moments before the hearing. Short of memorizing the staff report, some consideration for possible decisions and outcomes is desirable prior to the hearing.

6. Decibels & Details. Being swayed by the emotional power of a presentation is a common problem. Decisions should be rational, not determined by decibels. Conversely, highly sophisticated technical presentations should not have the affect of “dazzling with delicate detail.”

7. We’ve Heard It All Before. For many people, the fear of public speaking is intense. If someone is willing to face the

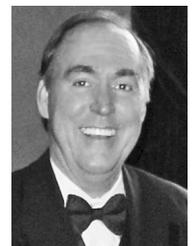
terror of speaking in front of a planning commission, it is vital that their presentation be given full consideration. Even if we have heard it all before.

8. Sensitization & Attenuation. There are some things that we are highly sensitive to, and others that we tune out. All the sky clutter of telephone poles, signs, and electric wiring may become so attenuated as to be invisible. Yet the application for a single cell tower can be so sensitizing as to panic an entire community. Alfred Hitchcock referred to that single focus of interest in a movie as a “McGuffin.” You do not have to look far to find the McGuffins in your decision-making.

9. Analysis Paralysis & Gut Feelings. Planning commissions sometimes focus on details or, conversely, lose sight of important details. I have attended hearings where commissions have asked for (and received) the most esoteric information. On the other end of the spectrum is “heuristic decision-making,” a fancy term for “going with your gut feelings” – another approach to avoid.

10. D-I-S-R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Last, but certainly not least, no planning commissioner should ever disrespect the public, other commissioners, or planning staff. This is something Elaine Cogan covers quite well in her *Now that You’re on Board* booklet, where she notes that “the important point to remember is just as you want to be treated with respect, the public deserves no less when dealing with you and the other board members.” ♦

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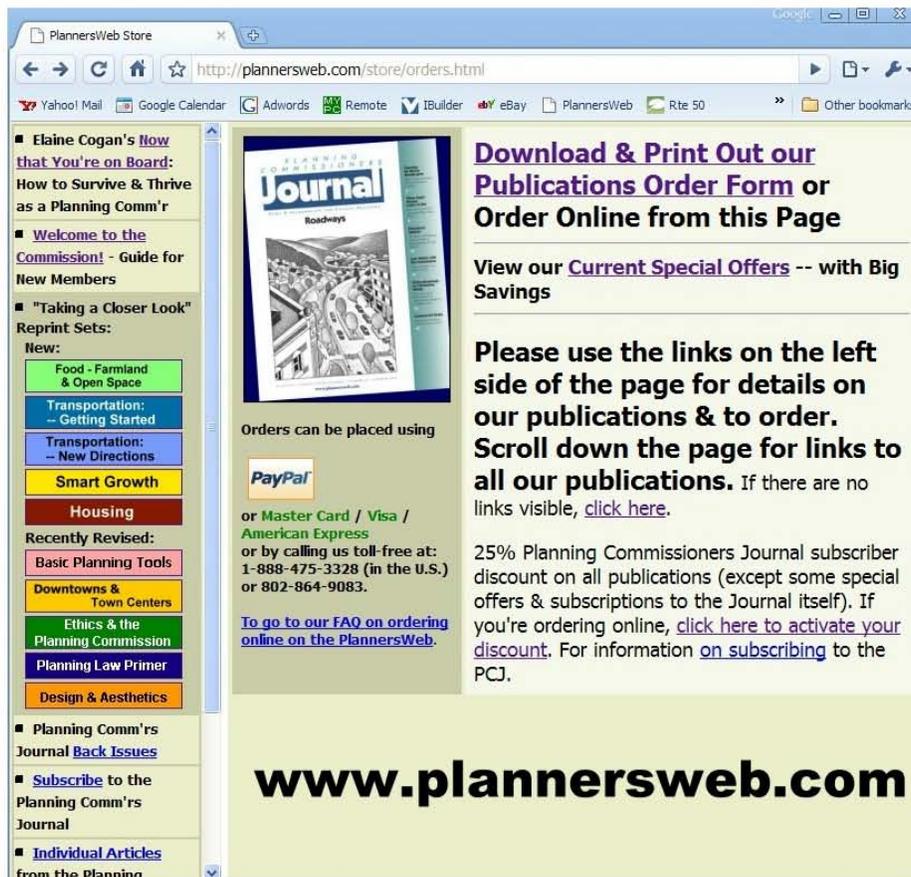
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