

Making A Difference

THE PLANNING COMMISSIONER AS COMMUNITY CHANGE AGENT

AN ABSENCE STILL FELT

Two years after his death, Reeve Hennion's absence is still felt on the planning commission he chaired in Jackson County, Oregon. "The perfect planning commissioner," says Planning Director Kelly Madding. "Fabulous," says Alwin Turiel, a former planning director. "A mentor for me and for many people," says Don Greene, who chairs the commission now. "He was extraordinary," adds Sue Kupillas, a county commissioner.

A quiet man who spent most of his life in journalism before starting two companies, Hennion fell in love with planning and land use issues after moving to Jackson County in the 1980s. His wife, Lyn, thinks it was because planning combined two of his interests, geography and the law. "If he hadn't been a journalist, he would have been a Supreme Court justice," she says. He was so devoted to the planning commission that, days before he died, he watched a

by Otis White

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commission meeting on television from his sick bed.

What makes Hennion interesting, though, isn't the affection people still feel for him, but the impact he had on his community. During his 12 years on the planning commission, Jackson County grew rapidly and changed politically, socially, and economically.

In many places, the tensions over these kinds of changes would have erupted into monumental zoning battles, as people fought over land use as a proxy for other community disagreements. Jackson County certainly had the potential for these kinds of battles – "nothing has ever had more land mines" than land use disputes in Southern Oregon, County Commissioner Kupillas says. The fact that the land mines didn't go off, in many ways, can be attributed to a single person, Reeve Hennion.

LEADERSHIP AND PLANNING COMMISSIONS

Hennion is an example of a rare but important kind of leader, one who helps his community navigate major changes while having little or no formal power. And if you like creating change without power, a planning commission isn't a bad place to do it. Not that it's part of the job.

In most places, citizen planners have two primary roles: to do responsible community planning and to render fair judgments on specific projects. (In some places, the planning commission over-

sees the planning department, which gives it a management function as well.) Most good commissioners are admired, then, for their farsightedness and fairness, not their ability to create change.

In some communities, leadership comes from traditional sources: elected officials and individuals who are deeply involved in civic work, such as chamber executives, business leaders, neighborhood activists, and nonprofit officials. Change in these places comes slowly or predictably enough that it can be managed by existing leaders working in the usual ways.

But other places are different. They get changes so fast or unpredictably that the normal political and civic processes can't keep up. Or they have the reverse situation, where there's not enough change and the community gets stuck, fighting old, increasingly irrelevant battles or doing nothing at all as progress passes it by.

What's needed in either case is something new: a new way of decision making or a new set of ideas to get the community moving forward.

The planning commission can be the perfect place for this leadership to emerge. First, because it's where many community disputes receive their earliest hearings, so if the community needs to learn new ways of resolving disagreements, the commission can be where it learns them. Second, with its mandate for planning, the commission is already concerned with the community's future. If new ideas are needed, where better for them to be developed and aired?

SOMEONE LIKE REEVE HENNION

What's needed in those circumstances, though, are commissioners with an interest in broader community leadership, along with the temperament, experiences, and skills to take a leadership



In sending us this photo of her late husband, Lyn Hennion noted that he was "leading the parade at our little ghost town of Buncom, Oregon, where he served as Mayor ... love the smile and the hat that became somewhat of a trademark."

role. In other words, someone like Reeve Hennion.

Those who knew him struggle to describe what made Hennion the perfect person to help a community facing big changes. There were his communications abilities – he had spent 22 years working for United Press International including a stint as bureau chief in San Francisco – so he knew how to talk about complex issues in ways most citizens could follow. He was also a good listener; he had a knack for taking in what was said at commission meetings and summarizing all sides accurately and fairly. Hennion was good, too, at moving discussions along while allowing all to have their say. “He was very, very adept at getting to the issue,” Kelly Madding remembers.

All of this, however, would have made Hennion only a very skillful planning commission chair. His talent as community leader was in seeing new ways of dealing with deep-seated differences. That became clear when the commission rewrote the county’s land development ordinance or LDO.

These ordinance rewrite projects can cause considerable conflict, and Jackson County had the potential for getting mired in controversy. “We do have our extremes,” Don Greene says, “and it does seem to get more extreme.”

But Hennion had a way of dealing with people at the extremes – those wanting the tightest possible restrictions on development and those wanting the least. He created a “steering committee” for the LDO rewrite, including the most passionate advocates but also others who were more moderate. He personally chaired the committee and insisted that its 20 members listen to people across the county. Over a two-year period, the committee held more than 60 public meetings, resolving one issue after another by consensus. Along the way, the committee briefed the planning commission on progress and sought public comment.

When the LDO rewrite came to a vote by the county commission in 2007 – hundreds of pages that would determine how land would be treated in Jackson

County for years to come – a crowd of some 150 people showed up at the commission meeting. Writing about the meeting later on, Hennion said he was a little nervous about the crowd until the planning director finished her presentation ... and “the audience burst into applause.”

As important as the LDO rewrite was, the process used to develop it was even more important because it showed Jackson County a new way of making difficult public policy decisions. Involve all sides, listen respectfully, seek public input, be patient, keep other officials informed, and decide by consensus. Reeve Hennion didn’t invent this process, but he showed his community how it could work. And while the Jackson County Planning Commission hasn’t faced a project as big or controversial as the LDO rewrite since then, officials say they’re sure they would use the steering committee approach again.

This is one way planning commissioners can be change agents, by showing their communities new ways of deciding issues. But it’s only one way.

COMMUNITIES CHANGE IN FOUR STAGES

The key is to understand how communities navigate change and where your own talents and interests lie. In barest outline, communities change in four stages: first by coming to grips with what’s not working, then by learning about possible solutions, weighing the solutions, and making decisions.

But, of course, real-life communities never follow an outline. Communities fight over facts and personalities. They delay, lurch forward, and suddenly run out of steam. Sometimes they go back and start over. They act, in other words, like what they are: places filled with diverse, sometimes quarrelsome human beings.

To be an effective change agent, then, you have to be part analyst (What is my community’s greatest needs? Where is it stuck?), part strategist (How could we get past this sticking point?), and part self-critic (What am I good at?). Reeve Hennion found his community’s needs –

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and his talents – lay in the final stage of change: decision making. That’s why he taught Jackson County a better way of making major decisions.

Your talents may lie elsewhere. For instance, in analyzing and publicizing problems, in bringing forward promising solutions, or in encouraging productive public debates. But you should know two things before setting out as a community change agent.

First, change doesn’t happen until all four stages are completed and the decisions made and implemented. Put another way, having good ideas isn’t good enough. Someone has to connect ideas to widely felt needs, encourage discussion and debate, and help move the community and its leaders to a decision.

Second, if your community succeeds in making it through all four stages, many people will have played a part, not just elected officials.

So ... why not planning commissioners? ♦

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