

Smoothing the Rocky Road

by Jim Segedy, Ph.D., FAICP and Lisa Hollingsworth-Segedy, AICP

In the mid-1990s, Jim served a term on the Delaware/Muncie Metropolitan Plan Commission in Indiana. Other voting members of the commission included a landscape architect, a farmer, a realtor, a local business owner, a mail carrier, and a retired teacher. This collection of citizens brought diverse backgrounds and varied professional and personal interests to their appointment, but most importantly, they all had a shared concern for their community.

Jim recalls that most of the cases they considered were rather straightforward and the group had little trouble reaching agreement on the content of their recommendations. However, there were several controversial development proposals that were presented during Jim's term and almost every one of these resulted in a split vote.

No doubt your planning commission is similar to the one on which Jim served, with the membership representing a wide diversity of interests, but all having the good of the community at heart. Planning commissions often struggle with group dynamics in the process of making decisions on difficult issues, such as:

- How do you, as a group, plan for what types of development would be in your hometown's best interest, and where they might most appropriately be located?
- How do you balance the rights of the individual and the common good?
- What's the best answer when proposals you're considering affect the local economy, traffic, natural and historic resources, and quality of life?
- Will you be able to find common ground in the process of weighing the relative merits of a permit request against the goals in your comprehensive plan

and the standards in your zoning ordinance?

In this column, we'll take a look at three ways by which you, as a planning commissioner, can smooth the rocky road before you.

1. Know the Story

Your community's comprehensive plan is its story, from the beginning until 20 years into the future. It contains your community's history, current situation, and anticipated future changes. It tells the story of your community's vision.¹ It lays out the path you must follow to meet needs and make improvements. When every member of the planning commission knows the story, it flows smoothly and the path is clear.

PLANNING COMMISSIONS
OFTEN STRUGGLE WITH
GROUP DYNAMICS IN
THE PROCESS OF
MAKING DECISIONS ON
DIFFICULT ISSUES.

Your ordinances and maps add details to the story: the what, where, and how of your hometown. What you as a planning commissioner need to know is: why? and what? Why were the plan, ordinances, and map drawn as they were? What was the intent of various district standards and their placement on the map?

In each of the zoning ordinances that Jim has ever been involved with developing, the district standards contain a

¹ Editor's Note: The Orton Family Foundation has been doing some fascinating work involving the power of stories and art in community planning. For one project: www.orton.org/projects/starksboro – be sure to view the related videos by using the Multimedia tab.

narrative description of the intent – details about what the district is designed to achieve. There's little doubt among planning commission members, staff, elected officials, and the public regarding the part each district plays in the community's story and whether or not proposed development or redevelopment is a part of the tale.

If your ordinances don't clearly describe their intent and purpose, or don't mesh with your comprehensive plan, then it is time to rewrite them.

2. Know the Boundaries

In this journey, how do we know where to turn and how fast we can drive? Planning commissions operate within standards of practice at a number of levels, and adhering to these standards may help avoid some confusion and conflict. It's like having a GPS.

First, there should be bylaws that describe meeting procedures, how public input is accepted, and other general housekeeping matters. These bylaws should be in compliance with your state planning and zoning procedures act (or their equivalent), which provides the statutory authority for planning and zoning and may also include direction on how local jurisdictions conduct public involvement in decision-making.

In addition, every state has a "sunshine law," which specifies that all decision-making must be transparent and take place in publicly-advertised meetings. This is important, because planning commissions, even when advisory only, are still subject to open meeting laws. Because of that, there are usually prohibitions on planning commissioners discussing pending cases prior to official meetings.²

² For more on "ex parte" communications and other ethical issues, see *Taking a Closer Look: Ethics & the Planning Commission* (www.plannersweb.com/ethics.html).

Finally, planning commissioners are encouraged, though not required, to follow the American Planning Association's "Ethical Principles in Planning."³ If you as a planning commissioner are not well versed in these standards, find some training. Fortunately, this is often available through your state chapter of the American Planning Association.

3. Know Your Teammates


Now back to our stories. There's a legend about two soldiers, one Union and one Confederate, who during the Siege of Richmond, found themselves left behind by their regiments and in each other's company. It was a bitterly cold winter night and their survival required them to share food and a campfire. By flickering firelight, the two strangers told each other about their families, their hometowns, memories of growing up and plans for when the war ended. In the light of day, they shouldered their weapons and walked in opposite directions, having found it harder to be enemies with someone when you know their story.

So what does this story mean to us on a planning commission? You've probably already discovered that your fellow commissioners can either see things similarly or differently depending on the story being told. Many times the characters can switch roles depending on how they see the story. In fact, you may have found yourself looking across the table at some of the other commissioners, as Jim did in Muncie over a decade ago, wondering, "How can they say that?"

To smooth the relationships on your planning commission, get to know the folks you're working with, including any staff that may assist you in executing your duties. You need to hear their stories, and to tell yours. The very act of sharing your story will reaffirm to listener and teller the truth of values, experience, and perspective.

Here are some ideas that may help you to expand your knowledge and get to understand that illusive "why" we

talked about earlier:

- Hold a retreat.  *Retreat? Advance?*
- Take a training course together.
- Go out for a beer (or coffee) after a meeting.

In a more relaxed setting, you can find out why your teammates agreed to serve on the planning commission, what strengths they bring, and what their understanding is of the community vision.

Share stories about living in the community. Talk about the "big game," the day the tornado hit, the tractor trailer wreck that caused a load of cows to be turned loose on the courthouse lawn. Big and small memories help to reinforce the "home" in hometown, the why of your community. After you've shared in this way, then you can talk about how some of those things relate to the plan or the ordinances.

Talk about developments or projects you like or don't like from nearby communities. Look in the rearview mirror at the results of your decisions for the past year or two and whether or not they turned out the way you expected – and how the planning commission might have shaped a better outcome?⁴

You can safely talk about the specifics of planning development in your community and not run afoul of your state's sunshine law as long as any specific cases you discuss are ones you've already heard and acted on.

SUMMING UP:

Know the story behind your plan and ordinances. Understand the legal and ethical boundaries that define how the commission functions. Be familiar with the interests of your teammates. By doing this, you can feel confident that everyone on the planning commission will be speaking a common language. You may also find commissioners working more effectively as a team when faced with difficult decisions. ♦

⁴ Consider a group tour of projects approved in prior years to see if they came out as the commission expected, or if there are lessons to be learned. For an example, see "Commissioners on Tour" in *PCJ* #61 (Winter 2006), p. 19.

³ Currently available at: www.planning.org/ethics/ethicalprinciples.htm.



Retreat? Advance?

by Elaine Cogan

Planning a "retreat"? The public may consider it a boondoggle. Staff may look at it as an opportunity finally to get the commissioners away from distractions. Commissioners may wonder if it is worth spending additional time away from their families and businesses.

Why have a retreat? Many find it worthwhile to get away from the ordinary routine to discuss matters you never get around to: a vision or long range plan, for example. Some commissions hold yearly retreats to orient new members and foster good working relations. There are many good reasons. Just be sure you all agree on why you need one.

If your state or local "open meetings" law requires, you will also have to announce your retreat to the public and the media. Having observers should not deter you from proceeding if you have a valid reason for holding the retreat. Even if you can lawfully meet in secret, don't. You will be found out and suspicions about what you did and how much it cost can be damaging to the good relations you must have with your community.

How do you measure success? It is important to conclude the retreat with an agreed upon list of actions or next steps. They can be related specifically to work you want to get done in a specific period of time or more generally to modes of conduct or behavior. They do not need to be quantifiable but should be sufficient to convince everyone that their time was well spent.

Excerpted from an article by the same title published in PCJ #26 (Spring 1997).

Jim Segedy is the Director of Community Planning for the Pennsylvania Environmental Council and a co-author of The Small Town Planning Handbook. He is also a member of the Edgewood Borough Planning Commission and the Swissvale Business Development Advisory Committee.



Lisa Hollingsworth-Segedy is Associate Director for River Restoration for American Rivers' Western Pennsylvania Field Office, and a former Planning Director for a Regional Planning Commission near Atlanta.

