

Sitting on Both Sides of the Table

From PCJ Editor Wayne Senville

What better way to celebrate the 20th Anniversary issue of the *PCJ* than by letting you hear directly from 25 professional and citizen planners from across the country. The “catch” – if you want to call it that – is that all of these talented individuals have served not just as professional planners, but also as members of planning, zoning, or related local boards.

Having sat on both sides of the table, so to speak, they have valuable insights into the challenges facing not just professional planners, but planning commissioners as well. Over the next eight pages you'll read their responses to four questions I posed.

In the sidebars, each of the 25 planners will tell you what got them interested in serving on their local planning commission.

What got you interested in serving on your planning board?



Ann Bagley, FAICP
Dallas, TX
Member: City of Dallas Plan
Commission; Principal, Bagley
Associates, Dallas.

As an entry level planner, I had the good fortune to work with some very dedicated commissioners in Sugar Land, Texas. They were engaged and engaging, understanding and interested in doing what was best for the community as a whole. With them as examples, I became interested in training planning commissioners at conferences and workshops. I also realized I wanted to give back to the community like my first commissioners.



Austin Bleess
Winnebago, MN
Past Member: City of Blaine
(MN) Planning Commission;
City Administrator for Win-
nebago; former Community

Development Director, Wells, MN.

I was looking for ways to get more involved with the community. Being able to help direct and guide the city for a great future was something I really wanted to be a part of.

Was there anything that particularly surprised you when you started serving on the planning commission?

It's Harder Than You Think

The biggest surprise was how much time being on the planning commission took and how little time I had to devote to the commission. I thought it would be easier for me being a former planner – i.e., I would understand the codes and the staff reports and wouldn't have to study things so much. But I never had enough time to visit all the sites and to thoroughly read the staff reports.

— Bonnie Johnson, Lawrence, KS

Having written the staff reports based on the codes and ordinances, I found that making decisions was harder than I ever imagined. This was especially true when cases had people and neighborhood aspects that were not always clear in the code.

— Ann Bagley, Dallas, TX

The pressure of having residents, neighbors, friends, staring at you expecting you to do “the right thing,” even if the law was not necessarily pointing you in that direction.

— Aaron Henry, Danvers, MA

Since I did not work in a public sector position during the day, I did not expect four-hour planning commission meetings! I probably underestimated how contentious some issues were and how passionate people were about their neighborhoods.

— Glenn Lapin, Huntington Woods, MI

My biggest surprise was how much I needed to get up-to-speed on basic planning principles again. I've worked my entire career in the transportation planning field, so I don't deal with variances, conditional use permits, zoning, or other related issues on a day-to-day basis. It helped that I still had some of my old college books and the materials I used to study for the AICP exam. After revisiting those materials, and attending a few meetings, I was feeling much more comfortable!

— Wayne Hurley, Fergus Falls, MN



THE BIGGEST SURPRISE WAS
HOW MUCH TIME BEING ON
THE PLANNING
COMMISSION TOOK.

You've Got to Be Kidding!

Prior to volunteering as planning commissioner I worked in the development end of the planning world. As I like to say, I am a game warden who used to be a poacher. I was surprised by the fact that, on occasion, planning commissions could feel pressure that could lead them to consider subjective issues that may not have been germane (from a strictly planning perspective) to the issues at hand.

— Robin Pierce, Charlotte, VT

I was astonished by the disproportionate time given to relatively minor issues (sign plan amendments, mostly) and the comparatively little time allotted to making significant and meaningful changes to our codes and our plans. Most of all, I was surprised that no time was devoted to learning. I think that even a small portion of time devoted to learning about the prevailing wisdom in planning and zoning would have been beneficial for me and my fellow commissioners.

— Jacob Day, Salisbury, MD

What surprised me most about how the planning & zoning commission worked was its initially baffling mix of rigid enforcement of regulations and a willingness to bend the rules. It took several months of meetings for me to sort out the unstated sub-context of which rules-regulations were regarded as critical to the city and which were less so.

— Bob Ernst, Chesterfield, MO

The lack of knowledge of planning law and practices by fellow board members surprised me. Many decisions were driven by emotion (the members' personal preferences) rather than by adherence to the zoning ordinance and the land use law.

— Louis Joyce, Alloway Twp., NJ

Some Other Surprises

The biggest surprise was that I didn't agree with the staff recommendations as often as I presupposed I might.

— Chris Dunn, Columbia, MO

My professional career had been (and still is) primarily with smaller communities usually with populations less than 20,000. I was surprised to learn that big cities and small towns often have the same issues and same fights – managing growth, enforcing the code, trying to actually plan rather than just putting out fires every day.

— Tim Jackson, New Orleans, LA

I was very impressed at how active the commission was. After we got our packets, most of the commissioners checked out the locations the variances, conditional



use permits, etc., were being requested for. It was great to see citizen commissioners taking such an interest in it.

— Austin Bleess, Winnebago, MN

Finding that the other commissioners aren't necessarily as extreme in their positions ("pro-developer" or "tree-hugger") as is sometimes portrayed in the local media.

— Kim Henry, Knoxville, TN

THE BIGGEST SURPRISE WAS THAT I DIDN'T AGREE WITH THE STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS AS OFTEN AS I PRESUPPOSED I MIGHT.

What was most unexpected to me was the complexity a group of volunteers were asked to deal with, particularly in a setting with very little staff support or resources. It surprised me how little the community at large seemed to be aware or concerned about planning matters – but surprised me more when the room was packed with citizens when they were concerned about something.

— Martin Sokolich, Ridgely, MD

The first surprise: Each commission has its own personality – "MO" or way of "doing things" – which is not necessarily the way I was taught, or the way I believed based on my professional experience.

— David Hartt, Shaker Heights, OH



Peter Boecher, CRE, AICP
Bellaire, TX
Member: City of Bellaire Planning & Zoning Commission; Senior Associate with TBG, Inc., in Houston.

I thought that gaining a commissioner's perspective would be beneficial. The experience has been hugely beneficial and educational.



Jacob Day
Salisbury, MD
Member: City of Salisbury/Wicomico County Joint Planning Commission; Director of the Center for Towns, a program of the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy.

Service to my community through the planning commission felt like the most appropriate and relevant application of my time.



Christopher Dunn, AICP
Columbia, MO
Past Member: City of St. Joseph (MO) Planning Commission; former Director of Community Development, City of Leavenworth, KS.

I saw service on the planning commission as a way I could serve my city of residence and continue to grow professionally. I also thought I could help the city drop some bad practices by drawing attention to them by asking the right questions at commission meetings.



Cynthia Eliason, AICP
San Leandro, CA
Past Member: Board of Zoning Adjustment, City of San Leandro; Supervising Planner, City of Alameda, CA.

I wanted to give back to the community in which I lived.

Learn More

Getting and staying organized is essential for the proper conduct of the public's business. Our "Come to Order!" booklet will help your planning board work more effectively. From making the most of your meeting time, to preparing better agendas, to developing by-laws and rules of procedure, these 20 articles will provide you with dozens of tips and useful ideas. For details go to: www.plannersweb.com/c2o.html.

What got you interested in serving on your planning board?



Bob Ernst, Chesterfield, MO
Past Member: Pittsfield Township (MI) Planning & Zoning Commission; past planner with St. Louis County (MO) Dept. of Planning; Parsons Corp; and Jacobs Engineering.

I was in my third year of teaching urban/regional planning at a local university and had previously worked as a junior planner for a county planning department in another state, but wanted to be “on the firing line,” so to speak, in terms of decisions about how the city would look and function on a day-to-day basis.



**Michelle Gregory, AICP
Corbett, OR**
Member: Multnomah County Planning Commission; Principal, Soapbox Enterprises, Inc., providing planning consulting services; past planner for City of Milwaukie, OR.

After working as a research planner, a neighborhood planner, and then a collaborative planning consultant, I was intrigued by the opportunity to serve my own community in a policy making/leadership role. But I thought long and hard about how it might affect my life as a practicing planner before accepting the responsibility. This is important. If you serve as a planning commissioner you need to understand how it will affect your professional future.



**Fedolia “Sparky” Harris
Elk Grove, CA**
Member: City of Elk Grove Planning Commission; Senior Planner with City of Sacramento, Dept. of Transportation.

I live in Laguna West and enjoyed representing my neighbors on a large, complex community association. In 2003, our community was annexed into the City of Elk Grove. The annexation presented an opportunity for me to use what I had learned through the community association to hopefully improve the quality of life citywide through service on the planning commission.

If there's one piece of advice you'd give to planning commissioners based on your experience as a professional planner, what would it be?

Ask Questions

Don't take the staff or the professional planner's word on everything. Ask for an explanation. Commissioners need to understand that the staff's job is to interpret the regulations but the decision making process is not just a checklist. There is room for subjectivity as well, otherwise there is no need for the commission.

— Tim Jackson, New Orleans, LA

Ask questions if staff reports baffle or confound you. It's your job to inquire on behalf of the community. Also, allow your perspective to evolve ... these are turbulent times and people in community-based leadership roles must exude creativity and adaptability.

— Michelle Gregory, Corbett, OR

Don't be afraid to ask questions! Planning is a specialized field and planners often speak and write in jargon or “plannerese.” I can tell you that there are others in the room that don't understand, are a bit embarrassed, and need someone to speak up.

— Ann Bagley, Dallas, TX

Ask questions. If anyone (staff, an applicant, a citizen) says anything that sounds strange then ask about it and if people can't answer the questions, then postpone the decision. Don't let the desire to act quickly mean you make decisions when you are uncomfortable. Once applicants and citizens start seeing that you won't act without the proper information, they will be more forthcoming with information early on in the process.

— Bonnie Johnson, Lawrence, KS

Some advice: ask questions and be clear about what you want; learn as much as you can about the laws governing subdivision control, master plans, etc., and go to planning board member training courses.

— Sharon Wason, Walpole, MA



MAKE A DECISION BASED
ON THE MERITS OF THE
PROPOSAL, NOT THE
PERSONALITIES INVOLVED.

Decide on the Merits

Make a decision based on the merits of the proposal, not the personalities involved (pro or anti proposal). Hear and deliberate on issues that have been advanced using a reasoned justification: sometimes opinions can be delivered as facts; how do the testimonies stand the test, are they accurate/possible? Work from the perspective of encouraging appropriate development, not the position of discouraging inappropriate development.

— Robin Pierce, Charlotte, VT

Be sure that your community has a clear vision for the future and keep it in mind when making decisions.

— Bill Wiley, Leesburg, FL

The ideal situation is that the board and staff see themselves as a team, each with distinct but equal roles. Staff is there to do the heavy lifting regarding the board's submission standards and plan reviews and the board's job is to determine if the submission meets the relevant approval criteria.

— Aaron Henry, Danvers, MA

Know your land use code better than anyone else, and never compromise your integrity or the community's quality of life. And one more important tip: always assume your microphone is 'ON'!

— Andy Smith, Fort Collins, CO

Be patient in terms of trying to understand exactly what directions the city wants to take in terms of growth/development. Simple platitudes on being “pro-development” or “pro-economic growth” or “pro-environment/sustainability” can have a bewildering set of meanings that may or may not be consistent.

— Bob Ernst, Chesterfield, MO

Listen & Learn

Make sure to take the time to read and understand the information presented in the staff reports prior to the meeting. Staff really appreciates commissioners who have read their packet and we can always tell by the questions asked at the meeting who has or hasn't.

— James Shockey, Grand Lake, CO

Do your homework! There is nothing worse than coming to the meeting and hearing the ripping open of meeting packets for the first time.

— Cynthia Eliason, San Leandro, CA

Talk with the staff. It's not always possible to have great answers to every question during the meeting. Giving the staff a heads up on your questions is greatly appreciated!

— Austin Bless, Winnebago, MN

First, don't try to give the impression that you know more than you actually do. Second, listen more carefully to your professional staff.

— Steve McCutchan, Sandy, UT

Listen to all sides of an issue before making a final decision. Be prepared to compromise.

— Glenn Lapin, Huntington Woods, MI

If you can make the time for it, bring in an expert – pro bono – who can speak to some of the more challenging issues you're dealing with and who doesn't have skin in the game, so to speak. An urban designer, planner, architect, landscape

architect, or other professional operating in the built environment might be a great guest speaker – who is not lobbying on a particular issue, but is only there to impart some knowledge.

— Jacob Day, Salisbury, MD

TRY VERY HARD TO SEE
BOTH SIDES OF AN ISSUE.

Focus on the Facts

Always look at the facts. If you're not sure there is enough information to make a decision, ask for it and postpone the decision until you have that information – although this can be hard to do when there are people who need a decision quickly or there are grant deadlines.

— Stacey Smith, Cle Elum, WA

Put personal preferences and prejudices aside to deliberate on technical issues and application merits, and be proactive to seek changes to local zoning laws where deficiencies have been identified.

— Louis Joyce, Alloway Twp., NJ

Try very hard to see both sides of an issue. It's easy to vilify developers as uncaring, manipulative, and simply out to make a profit. But remember that it is not a crime to make a reasonable profit and that without people taking considerable risk with their own capital, the general public would not have most of the venues that we all frequent and enjoy. With this said, commissioners have a duty to protect the public, follow the general plan, and enforce the city code – and sometimes a project just does not conform to that mandate.

— Fedolia “Sparky” Harris, Elk Grove, CA

Understand not only what the ordinances say, but the logic behind them. Try to communicate that there should be nothing arbitrary or preferential about any decision you make, and that there is frequently a way to “meet in the middle.”

— Martin Sokolich, Ridgely, MD



David Hartt
Shaker Heights, OH
Past Member: City of Shaker Heights Planning Commission; Principal, D.B. Hartt Inc., Planning & Development Consultants, Cleveland.

As a volunteer I was working on the campaign of a candidate for mayor. I was doing so without any expectation (honestly!) of attaining a “higher office.” Immediately after her election I was asked to serve on the commission. I was honored and flattered to be asked. I said yes; serving, I believe honorably and faithfully, for 19 years till last December.



Aaron Henry, AICP
Danvers, MA
Member: Danvers Planning Board; Senior Planner, Town of Lexington, MA.

After years of staffing a board, I thought it might be interesting to experience what sort of pressures members are under – and learn why they don't just do what staff tells them to! Not to mention that I truly did (and still do) want to serve my community and had the skills to step in.



Kimberly Henry, AICP
Knoxville, TN
Member: Knoxville Downtown Design Review Board; Past Member: Knoxville-Knox County Metropolitan Planning Commission. Owner, KH Consulting; former Director of Operations for The Development Corp. of Knox County.

I enjoy community service and feel very strongly that it is important to give back, and to participate. Planning commissions and boards need a diversity of talents – from neighborhood activists, engineers, and environmentalists, to professional planners. A well rounded board, with multiple viewpoints, provides the best guidance for the community.



Wayne Hurley, AICP
Fergus Falls, MN
Member: City of Fergus Falls Planning Commission; Planning Director, West Central Initiative, Fergus Falls, MN.

I enjoy being involved in my community. When I got into planning as a profession, it was because it was something I was very interested in on a personal level. That carries through both my career and personal life.

What got you interested in serving on your planning board?



Tim Jackson, AICP
New Orleans, LA
Past Member: New Orleans City Planning Commission; Senior Research Associate, University of New Orleans, Dept. of Planning and Urban Studies; former planning consultant.

I had not considered being on the New Orleans City Planning Commission until my district councilman approached me about filling a vacancy. It was something new, a new learning experience, and I felt that as a professional planner I also had something to offer.



Bonnie Johnson, Ph.D., AICP
Lawrence, KS
Past Member: Lawrence-Douglas County Metropolitan Planning Commission; Assistant Professor, University of Kansas Dept.

of Urban Planning; former staff planner for Amarillo, TX; Liberty, MO; and Johnson County, KS.

I have to say I really wondered what it would be like being on the other side of the table and I also liked the idea of being one of the people making the decisions – as much as a planning commission can do that sort of thing!



Louis Joyce
Alloway Township, NJ
Past Member: Alloway Township Planning Board; Planning Director for Salem County, NJ.

I was happy to volunteer to serve on my local planning board and knew that my knowledge of planning would be an asset to the board. Also, when I started on the board I was not practicing planning full time, so it wasn't "too much of a good thing"!



Glenn Lapin
Huntington Woods, MI
Past Member: City of Huntington Woods Planning Commission; Planning consultant; former Director of Planning & Development for Detroit Renaissance, Inc.

Being able to serve the community where I lived prompted me to join the planning commission. The projects I worked on during the day related to issues facing large cities. By joining the planning commission, I was able to address very different issues – issues that impacted smaller communities.

If there's one piece of advice you'd give to planners based on your experience as a planning commissioner, what would it be?

Work With Your Planning Board Members

I think many planners, not all, but some, tend to think of themselves as the experts and don't spend enough time communicating with their commissioners. Most commissioners want to do the right thing and make the right decision. They need planners' expertise and analyses, but commissioners do not like to be dis-ed.

— Tim Jackson, New Orleans, LA

Defer to the members who have been on the board/commission for a long time. They likely have historical knowledge about how things came about and why they are the way they are. You may have planning training, but they understand the past.

— Cynthia Eliason, San Leandro, CA

Let us in. Let us commissioners in on your decision making. If an applicant regularly turns in incomplete applications and is not forthcoming with information, let the commissioners (or at least the chair) know. If you are getting lots of calls from the public about a particular application, let us know. Give us a "heads up" on controversies that might be brewing. Make us part of the team. ... Also, if the commission regularly changes your recommendations then ask them how we can get on the same page or start giving them options up front.

— Bonnie Johnson, Lawrence, KS

Planners need to take the time to listen to commissioners. Most commissioners don't have a degree in planning and therefore may ask questions that seem simple to those who work in the field every day. Take time to really get to know your commissioners, their strengths and weaknesses in planning – that way you'll know where they are coming from when they have questions.

— James Shockey, Grand Lake, CO



PLANNING BOARD MEMBERS
NEED CLEAR INFORMATION
IN PLAIN ENGLISH.

Communicate Clearly

Keep your presentations brief and assume that the commissioners have read your staff report. I live by PowerPoint presentations but nothing is more frustrating than watching eyes glaze over when your presentation goes too long. The intent of the presentation should be to give the audience an idea of what you are talking about without going into excruciating detail and to remind the commissioners of their questions.

— Fedolia "Sparky" Harris, Elk Grove, CA

Remember that you speak a foreign language that might scare some people. Take the time to "back up" and describe the rationale and basis of any project to anyone who asks.

— Andy Smith, Fort Collins, CO

Planning board members need clear information in plain English to help them navigate through the often confrontational and contentious public hearing process. If you as a planner can help keep the proceedings civil, keep the decibel meter in

the conversational range, and keep them out of court, they should thank you for doing a good job.

— Sharon Wason, Walpole, MA

Reports, recommendations, and answers to all questions should be easily understood or readable by anyone. I know there is the need for the legal side being in the report, but a good summary and well-written conditions is recommended. Most people, including the commissioners look for the summary.

— Stacey Smith, Cle Elum, WA

Organize Your Information

Figure out what works for the planning board's present membership so that you get them what they need to handle regulatory matters as quickly and efficiently as possible. This is the psychologist part of the job: this member likes paper copies, that one electronic, they may want a detailed staff report or only a cursory one, and so on.

— Aaron Henry, Danvers, MA

Remember that the folks on the planning commission are citizen planners, not professionals, and they may not know all the ins-and-outs of the planning field. Make sure to take the time early on to get them the background knowledge they need to do a good job as a planning commissioner.

— Wayne Hurley, Fergus Falls, MN

Good graphics can help everyone involved gain a better understanding of an issue. Many communities now have GIS capability, and with Google Earth and SketchUp there are no excuses for uninspired or incomplete staff reports.

— Chris Dunn, Columbia, MO

Keep the information provided to commissioners as simple and straight forward as possible. Watch out for information overload. But if an ordinance section is referenced, include the excerpt.

— Peter Boecher, Bellaire, TX

Try to think of questions that might arise [at the meeting]. If you can include pictures of the site that certainly helps out. Also getting the information out as early as possible is great. It gives the commissioners

DON'T TAKE REJECTION OF YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS PERSONALLY.

time to look it over and get out to check out the site.

— Austin Bless, Winnebago, MN

Some Words of Advice

Remember your role as a trained practitioner when caught in the midst of highly contentious community planning challenges. When you feel the heat, give yourself time to be contemplative, so you can strike that vital balance between emotional detachment from the situation and compassion for the community that is struggling with whatever the dilemma may be.

— Michelle Gregory, Corbett, OR

Don't take rejection of your recommendations personally.

— Ann Bagley, Dallas, TX

Work with, don't disdain the private sector (which is often the applicant) for wanting to make a profit. Too often the cry is "... all they want to do is make a profit." Of course they do!! The community relies on and expects the private sector to take considerable risk to achieve the community's own aspirations. Public objectives should not be viewed as loftier than the private objectives, but equal to them. It's the planner role to mediate the differences between two equally valid public and private perspectives.

— David Hartt, Shaker Heights, OH

Never underestimate the value of superior design. Design has the ability to lift the human spirit. When possible encourage problem solving approaches to design. Be creative.

— Robin Pierce, Charlotte, VT

For small communities with limited staff don't hesitate to reach out to other sources for assistance such as volunteers, other planners, your regional planning council, other cities. Don't spend a lot of time trying to reinvent the wheel.

— Bill Wiley, Leesburg, FL



Steve McCutchan, AICP
Sandy, UT
Past Member: City of Riverside (CA) Design Review Board; Principal, Blake McCutchan Design, Sandy, UT.

I thought it would be both fun and interesting to sit on a board, review and make decisions, particularly with my professional background. However, my principle interest was in just serving the city where I had lived for the past thirty years.



Robin Pierce, AICP
Charlotte, VT
Past Member: Town of Charlotte Planning Commission; Planner for Village of Essex Junction, VT.

I was a planning commissioner first, before I started to work as a municipal planner. I had experienced planning in large cities and had moved to a rural community [Charlotte, Vermont] and was very interested in understanding the planning issues there. I have always volunteered in the community I lived in.



James R. Shockey, AICP
Grand Lake, CO
Member: Town of Grand Lake Planning Commission; Town Planner, Winter Park, CO.

Prior to my current employment in Winter Park, I was the planner for Grand Lake. Since I still live in Grand Lake, and am interested in planning issues, when a position opened on the commission, I jumped on it. It is great to sit on the commission with several members who were present when I was the planner there four years ago!



Andy Smith
Fort Collins, CO
Member: City of Fort Collins Planning & Zoning Commission; Vice President, ZoomGrants; past Senior Planner for City of Loveland, CO.

I really love the city where I live, and wanted to contribute my time, energy, and expertise. As a senior planner responsible for downtown redevelopment in a nearby town, I was often confused when clear goals contained in the comprehensive plan were occasionally tossed aside for short term objectives while reviewing a development proposal. I wanted to learn more about the variables at play in the development review process, and help build a planning culture that promoted confidence and excellence.

What got you interested in serving on your planning board?



Stacey Smith
Cle Elum, WA
Past Member: Town of Cle Elum Planning Commission; Planner, Okanogan County, WA.

I was a planning commission member prior to becoming a planner. I did this during my college years. My mom had been a planning commission member for Snohomish County, Washington, so you could say it ran in the family!



Martin Sokolich
Ridgely, MD
Member: Town of Ridgely Planning Commission; Long-Range Planner, Talbot County, MD.

I had never considered becoming a commissioner. But I moved into a small town and in short order was recruited. The commission had faced a number of growth management and community character issues and were looking for new members who understood the concerns.



Sharon Wason, AICP
Walpole, MA
Past Member: Town of Walpole Planning Board; Town Planner for Foxborough, MA; past Executive Director of Southern NH Regional Planning Commission.

We bought our first home in 1979, and my husband came home with the local paper which had a front-page story on three vacancies in a five-person planning board. Jim said, "Didn't you take a class in planning at MIT?" So I ended up in a seven person race, and was one of the three winners. My experience on the planning board helped lead me to a career in planning.



Bill Wiley, AICP
Leesburg, FL
Past Member: City of Dunnellon (FL) Planning Commission; Director of Community Development, City of Leesburg.

Living in the community and seeing a need for my expertise because the city is small and their staff resources were limited.

Are there any suggestions you have for strengthening the working relationship between staff planners and planning commissioners?

Keep Lines of Communication Open

It is important to have a regular flow of information to help both staff and planning commissioners do their jobs better and strengthen relationships.

— Glenn Lapin, Huntington Woods, MI

Open communication is the best way to have a great working relationship. Talking outside of the monthly meetings is a great way to build a rapport between staff and commissioners. Communication is the key to every great working relationship.

— Austin Bless, Winnebago, MN

Information sharing in both directions is vital. Information from staff planners on city council activities and recent real estate inquiries/activities is beneficial. Likewise, commissioners should alert staff to issues of concern or topics of interest.

— Peter Boecher, Bellaire, TX

I'm a big fan of dropping in on the staff at our planning department (they're probably not wild about it) – but it creates opportunities for discussion and has generated some of the more interesting ideas that have come up in our comprehensive plan development process.

— Jacob Day, Salisbury, MD

Constant communication!

— Tim Jackson, New Orleans, LA

Our planning director regularly calls each commissioner to answer any questions that can be appropriately addressed before each meeting. He has also begun a practice of meeting with each commissioner periodically without any agenda to listen to concerns and to simply become better acquainted. Both of these practices are greatly appreciated and should be replicated.

— Fedolia "Sparky" Harris, Elk Grove, CA

OPEN COMMUNICATION
IS THE BEST WAY TO HAVE
A GREAT WORKING
RELATIONSHIP.



Respect, Trust, Expectations

Respect by both sides. Once someone has no respect for the other, then issues start to arise. Look at it as being coworkers who should and must get along in order to have smooth meetings.

— Stacey Smith, Cle Elum, WA

Keep your politics to yourself and well-hidden. Make sure there are elevated levels of transparency in your department's actions and in the documentation trail you build. Be prepared to explain the reasoning behind just about everything you do. You'll find that these acts rapidly build trust. Also, take full and immediate responsibility when you do mess up, as we all occasionally will.

— Chris Dunn, Columbia, MO

Responsive communication and mutual respect should be a two way street.

— Ann Bagley, Dallas, TX

Probably the best thing to have is a good organizational/procedural manual. It should clearly spell out the roles and responsibilities of the board, the planner (and other board personnel), the applicants, and the public. A detailed job description which lays out clear expectations of what the board thinks the planner should be doing is also helpful.

— Sharon Wason, Walpole, MA

Commissioners need to get off of their pedestals (dais) and try to work hand in hand on an equal basis with professional staff.

— Steve McCutchan, Sandy, UT

I think getting to know your commissioners or planners on a personal level will go a long way in creating a good working relationship.

— James Shockey, Grand Lake, CO

Hold Work Sessions, Retreats, and Training

Informal training sessions and workshops allow people to get to know each other better and ask questions that may seem irrelevant or embarrassing in a more formal hearing setting. The less you are strangers who meet twice a month the better you will make those hard decisions.

— Cynthia Eliason, San Leandro, CA

Work sessions are really, really valuable for problem solving and idea exploration. Commissioners and staff planners collaborate most effectively when they have ample work session opportunities prior to the more pressurized public meeting/hearing format in which the formal decisions are made.

— Michelle Gregory, Corbett, OR

We had occasional dinner meetings to discuss planning topics (appropriately “sun-shined” – i.e., with public notice). These provided a much more relaxed atmosphere where staff and commissioners could interact about general planning policy and regulatory framework.

— Kim Henry, Knoxville, TN

WORK SESSIONS ARE
REALLY, REALLY VALUABLE
FOR PROBLEM SOLVING AND
IDEA EXPLORATION.

Have a regular retreat or “check-in” study session with the commissioners to see how things are going. How are the public hearings going? Are the staff reports what you need? What should we do differently with presentations? ...

If the commission is being inconsistent then bring that up – ask “Hey, we always ask for trails to connect cul-de-sacs but you didn’t require it last time even though we recommended it, what happened?” Debrief some old cases – what did staff recommend? What did the planning commission do and then what did the city council decide? How is that decision working out today?

— Bonnie Johnson, Lawrence, KS

Do continued training with your commissioners and encourage them to attend formal planning commission conference training.

— Bill Wiley, Leesburg, FL



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TO YOURSELF AND
WELL-HIDDEN.

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