

How Effective is Your Planning Board?

by Elaine Cogan

Is your planning board respected even when some of its decisions are controversial? That is just one of many questions to ask when gauging your effectiveness, a process that should be ongoing.

A rough measurement is what might be called the “sustain-ability” index. Check the record of the last two years. When your opinions were appealed to your governing body, were they overturned more than they were sustained? A yes answer may indicate the commission is at odds with the elected officials. If so, it could be that you are not effective advocates for your positions or out of step with your community. On the other hand, it may be that your governing body is failing to follow adopted codes in its decisions.

Either case should be cause for concern and honest evaluation. While planning boards should not expect their decisions to be rubber-stamped, neither should they be regularly overturned. If the problem is with the governing body’s misapplication of the zoning code or other provisions, consider requesting a joint workshop to resolve matters. Please see my column, “Working Effectively with Elected Officials,” in PCJ #20 (Fall 1995). If the situation persists, your community can suffer.

Even if the commission and the governing body generally agree, there are other ways to ascertain the commission’s effectiveness.

Reputation. Is the planning board considered generally pro- or anti-development? Be wary of either label. Make sure all your rulings are fair and based on your honest interpretation of the values, plans, and statutes of your community. Deal openly and fairly with controversy. You probably are on the right track when the developers accuse you of being pro-neighborhoods and vice-versa.

But remember, planning commissions sometimes have to make tough decisions that are not popular with either side.

Advocacy. Are you willing to speak up for sound planning principles and when you do, do people listen? Do organizations such as the League of Women Voters and other civic groups look to the planning commission for leadership? Another measure is how often commission actions are the subject of letters to the editor of your local newspaper. Whatever side writers take is less important than if they consider the work of the commission worthy of serious dialogue.

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Influence. Are your policies routinely followed by other agencies and bureaus, or do they find ways to bypass them? Similarly, are you included in conversations about issues that affect planning but may be the responsibility of a separate agency, such as those dealing with freeways, schools, or parks? If planning is defined too narrowly, you will not be welcome at the table when such vital issues are discussed. A planning board will enhance its authority if it is seen as being interested in cooperating and collaborating with other agencies as the need arises, rather than acting in isolation.

Oversight. Do you provide appropriate direction to planning staff? While the board should never micro-manage, members should know what goes on

outside the board room. Are citizens treated with respect? How long do they have to wait to be served? Are planners being accused in the media and other circles of being either too strict or too lenient in their interpretation of the code? Whether or not you actually hire the planning director, the effectiveness of the board’s planning decisions are directly related to how they are carried out.

Personal relationships. No commission or board can be effective or taken seriously if its members are constantly bickering. At all public meetings, you should respect each other regardless of your differences. If you absolutely cannot get along, you should seriously consider seeking intervention by a neutral, third party or asking for resignations from the warring parties.

In summary, though it may be difficult to measure the planning commission’s effectiveness, it is nevertheless an exercise worthy of your time and effort. ♦

Elaine Cogan, principal in the Portland, Oregon, planning and communications firm of Cogan Owens Cogan, LLC, is a consultant to many communities undertaking strategic planning or visioning processes. Her column regularly appears in the *Planning Commissioners Journal*.



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