

And the Consensus is ...

by Elaine Cogan

“Ms. Chairperson, I move that...”
 “And I second it!”

How frequently does this happen at your planning commission meetings? You are in the middle of an informal discussion and someone on the board attempts to cut everything short by making a motion. This is quickly seconded by another eager beaver, and before you know it, you are forced to follow a formal discussion process. This simple act can

stifle a free and open discussion, especially if someone is zealous about following prescribed rules of order.

Another way to reach decisions is by consensus, or general agreement. Knowing when to vote and when to rely on consensus can contribute substantially to the smooth running of your planning board. First, it is important to acknowledge that most, if not all, decisions on legal matters require a recorded vote. Some issues require a simple majority; others two-thirds or more. These procedures should be spelled out clearly and followed precisely.

Many other issues, however, are best resolved without a vote. Voting can polarize people and create a winner/loser environment. Consensus implies that the group can come to general agreement without forcing individuals to take sides.

Is there a consensus-builder on your board? If you are the chair, do not assume you have to take that role if it is not a comfortable position for you. Your primary responsibility is keeping order and giving everyone a fair opportunity to speak. If you are not the chair but have that skill, do not hesitate to use it. The consensus-builder can be anyone on the board who has the patience, aptitude, and interest.

The consensus-builder relies as much on understanding body language as on listening to what people say. Board members who shake their heads vigorously without saying anything may be indicating silent disagreement. Others, who tap a pencil on the desk, may be impatient and anxious to move on. Someone leaning way back in her chair may be showing she is bored or contemplative. Interpreting non-verbal behavior signals accurately is an important aspect of consensus-building.

If you aspire to be the consensus-builder, listen carefully to the discussion,

watching the participants' actions at the same time. Wait for a momentary lull in the discussion, after it seems that all the points have been raised and the conversation is becoming repetitive. Use summary language such as “It appears that we all agree on...” or “It is pretty clear that we want to...” or “We seem to have consensus on...” Most times, members will nod and be receptive to moving the conversation forward. If you have misread them and board members disagree with your summary, they will most certainly tell you. If this happens, you can continue the discussion until there appears to be general agreement.

A consensus can be reached even if you cannot agree but have exhausted the points to talk about. Then, you can say, “Since we seem far apart on this issue, why don't we move on?”

Though most people find a consensus format very comfortable and preferable to constant voting, there may be some board members who challenge this mode of decision-making. Obviously, it can be used only if most or all agree.

Voting is a clear and direct method of reaching a decision. The consensus model is more intuitive. Each has a proper place in the decision-making process of a well-functioning planning board. You may even find yourself using both techniques at suitable occasions. “We seem to generally agree on this ... but not on Let's take a vote on this one matter.” ♦

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Online Comments:

“Consensus comes easier on non-controversial items.

While this may seem blatantly obvious, you would be amazed (or maybe not) how much time is spent talking in circles on agenda items that will be passed unanimously. The chair needs to bring any circular discussions to an end. The best way I have seen this done is by calling for a motion.”

– Dale R. Powers, AICP, Interim City Planner, City of Brainerd, Minnesota

“Regardless of the circumstances our Chairman will go out of his way to assure that whoever wants to be heard receives their opportunity. We seem to reach consensus, at least to a great degree, in near all of our deliberations without a specific ‘consensus builder.’ ... Any of our members will take the lead as they deem necessary.”

– Bob Steiskal, Jr., Member, Gulf Shores [Alabama] Planning Commission

“As Chairman of the Plan Commission in the Town of Dodgeville, Wisconsin, my conviction about the value of consensus building couldn't be stronger. Democracy is, at its heart, dependent upon good citizens with fair minds who can work their way through all of the information and arguments and come to an agreement about their decision.”

– Lois Merrill, Dodgeville, Wisconsin