

MEMO TO PLANNING COMMISSIONERS – SUBJECT: What Planners Do

by Carolyn Braun

Editor's Note: This is the first in a series of informal discussions about different aspects of planning. Our panelists: Carolyn Braun (who also provides some introductory remarks), Lee Krohn, Glynis Jordan, and Larry Frey.

Do you know the daily activities of your planning staff? Have you been to the planning offices during regular work hours? Do you know what is required to apply for a planning or zoning approval? Have you called staff before a meeting to ask a question or raise a concern? Let's go behind the scenes and take a look at a "typical" day of one planning professional.

Upon arriving in the morning, Planning Director Tim Fairbanks reviews the messages he didn't get to yesterday and listens to new messages. He checks his schedule and begins making phone calls.

The receptionist hands Tim a message. A citizen is out in the lobby and has some zoning questions. Tim quickly finishes the call and goes to the counter. To answer the questions, Tim pulls the planning records, but finds the information he wants is missing. He promises to look further, takes the citizen's phone number, and walks back to his office.

After returning more calls, it's time for the weekly development review meeting. Along with Tim, those attending include the City Engineer, Fire Chief, Zoning Administrator, Building Inspector, and a

Community Development Department staff member. The meeting lasts two hours, and goes over current applications and site plans. During the discussion, it is determined that one plan will need to be reviewed by the state department of transportation. Another plan is still incomplete, though staff had requested additional information from the applicant the previous week.

After returning to his office, Tim calls the state department of transportation, explains the project, and puts a copy of the plans in the mail. Next he calls the applicant with the incomplete plan, and sets up a meeting for the following day. Tim explains that the project application will have to be taken off the Planning Commission's upcoming agenda since there will not be enough time for staff to review any new information provided by the applicant before the meeting.

After lunch, Tim meets with a citizen who has concerns about a project neighboring his property that is scheduled for review by the Planning Commission. Following that meeting, Tim has an appointment with Jeff Newman, the newly appointed Planning Commissioner. Tim takes some time to explain the format of the Commission's meetings, and gives Jeff the upcoming meeting packet. Tim emphasizes to Jeff the importance of thoroughly reading the material before the

meeting, so that he can contact staff prior to the meeting with any questions or requests for additional information. Tim also suggests that Jeff allow time to visit project sites before the meeting, but cautions him to limit conversations with the applicant when out at the site.

... Such is a "typical" day in the life of a professional planner. Planners spend much of their time gathering information, sifting out the facts, and then distilling what they've found out – all the while drawing on their experience and training. They can and should be a valuable resource for you as a planning commissioner, whether through the reports they prepare for your meetings or in responding to your questions.

Understanding that staff is there to help you doesn't mean you have to agree with their recommendations. It should mean, however, that you have a respected professional you can trust and count on for sound information.

Lee Krohn:

Carolyn is certainly right on target in explaining that professional planners serve as a clearinghouse for all sorts of information, opportunities, and resource sharing. We also provide professional analysis of applications or issues before our boards, highlighting issues of conformance or concern, summarizing issues, and offering a range of alternative decisions as appropriate.

From an organizational perspective, I also think it's critical for staff and planning boards to have a clear understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities. In this context, as a staff planner I see my role as being in service to my boards, as broadly defined as needed to help us all do our jobs as best we can. This helps us work together efficiently and effectively. They don't hang me out to dry; I don't take it personally if they don't agree with all of my recommendations.

Glynis Jordan:

I feel strongly that the board or commission should be able to use staff whenever possible. Therefore I impress upon any of the board members that they can call or email anytime about a question or concern. It builds their respect for staff as sources of valuable information, and it helps keep project applications on track. However, we try to discourage impromptu visits from board members due to our often unpredictable schedules. Appointments, even on short notice, work best.

On Respect –

Glynis Jordan:

Cultivating an atmosphere of mutual respect between staff and commission is essential. Hopefully, commissioners will come to respect the hard work their staff does and staff's ability to act as counselors between conflicting stakeholders

(oftentimes different departments within the city or county government), and their knowledge of the profession. No one says commissioners and staff have to agree, but showing respect is vital to the relationship.

Lee Krohn:

I think it's important that we remember to thank our volunteer board members often; the job is not easy, and the hours are long. Personally, I thank my board members at the end of every background meeting memo, and verbally at the close of every meeting. They know it comes from the heart, and I think they find this small gesture meaningful.

Glynis Jordan:

Many times with a good working relationship between staff and commission, the commission will let staff know when they may be headed in an opposite direction, or when they'd like more information. Again, it's all about communication and respect.

Consistency and precedence should also be respected and commended by both sides – having the ability to stand up for what you believe should never be frowned upon as long as the atmosphere remains professional.

And then, when it's all over – you go for a beer (or soft drink!) and laugh and understand that we're all just people trying to do our jobs.

On the Role of the Commission's Chair –

Lee Krohn:

Another vital role is that played by the planning board's chair. A chair's role can be more than just “banging the gavel,” if you will, and announcing cases. Done well, it involves running an effective

meeting, managing board and public input, ensuring fair but not interminable proceedings, managing the evening's agenda, and knowing how and when to bring cases or evenings to a tactful close.

As planning director, I do work closely with the chairs of our town planning commission and development review board to brief them on agendas, cases, “hot button” issues, known or anticipated complications... and also on longer term scheduling and timing of priorities, projects, and hearings. I know that the chairs always appreciate these advance briefings and strategies, and this is reflected in how well they run their meetings.

Please know that these briefings are not intended in any way, nor are they used in any way, to bypass proper procedure or decisionmaking. Rather, the intent is to help the process run effectively and efficiently.

Glynis Jordan:

I agree with what Lee just said, and would add that a good chair can bring out the best in other members and in staff.

Sometimes there are a few strong willed members and sometimes there are silent members. A good chair will bring out the needed discussions and debates in an atmosphere that remains professional and doesn't move into a bashing of any one idea over another. A good chair will also know when to pull the plug on inappropriate comments or behavior by members of the board, by staff, or by the public.

I also concur that there can be valuable benefits from sitting down with the chair prior to the meeting and going over

things, in effect discussing a “game plan” for the meeting. This does not mean pigeonholing the end result, but rather figuring out how to bring out the relevant issues for discussion.

Larry Frey:

I definitely agree with Lee and Glynis that fostering a “relationship” between the staff planner and the chair is required. I think the best chairs need our close input so that they can run effective meetings. I also think they need to understand the behind the scenes stuff that can occur with applicants, such as refusing to submit information requested by staff, shoddy work, and the last minute submittal of plans and other filings.

Lee Krohn:

I am never afraid to make my boards aware of these kind of problems when they arise. Indeed, there have been times when significant new information that had been requested by staff well in advance was not received until the hearing itself. Having informed my board of this, they would ask immediately “has staff had a chance to review this.” If I said “no,” they would invariably move to recess the hearing.

When boards fail to do this, and agree to review major new information “at the table,” it offers clear encouragement to applicants to continue this poor practice.

Larry Frey:

To avoid this problem from even coming up at the hearing, we've added language in our city's land use regulations that allows staff to not place a request on the meeting agenda if the information is provided late.

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Carolyn Braun is Planning Director for the City of Anoka, Minnesota (population

18,200), located

in the Twin Cities metro area. She also served as a planning commissioner for thirteen years, including eight as chair. Carolyn is the author of “Planning From Different Perspectives,” which appeared in PCJ #24, Fall 1996.



Lee Krohn has been Planning Director for the Town of Manchester, Vermont (population

4,180) since 1989. He is a former chair of the Putney, Vermont, Planning Commission, and past President of the Vermont Planners Association. Lee is also a member of the PCJ's Editorial Advisory Board.



Glynis Jordan is Deputy Director of City-County Planning for Forsyth County (population

320,000) & Winston-Salem (190,000), North Carolina. She previously served as Director of Land Use Administration for the City of Pueblo, Colorado, and as a staff planner with the Burlington, Vermont, Planning Department.



Larry Frey is the Director of the Department of Development Services for Bradenton, Florida, a Gulf

Coast community of approximately 50,000, south of Tampa. He has over twelve years' public/private experience in planning and development. Larry also serves on the PCJ's Editorial Advisory Board.

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On Pre-Meeting Workshops, Work Sessions, and Retreats –

Larry Frey:

One of the things we've done in Bradenton to make our planning commission meetings run better is to schedule pre-meeting workshops. We hold this workshop on the Monday prior to our commission's monthly Wednesday meeting.

The workshops are informal and are designed to allow staff to provide our commissioners with a detailed, technical discussion of proposed projects scheduled for the upcoming meeting. The meeting is publicly noticed. However, members of the public are not allowed to comment unless the chair allows it. The applicant will attend and speak if desired.

While it can be difficult to get all members to attend the workshop (since it represents an extra afternoon of time), they've found these sessions quite helpful. These kind of extra meetings are certainly more staff intensive. But I think they serve an important purpose through clarification of difficult or controversial issues. The end result is to avoid unnecessary continuances or tablings of requests at the regular meeting. In other communities where I've worked, similar informal meetings have been held in neighborhoods affected by a proposed project.

Carolyn Braun:

About three or four years ago, we started holding monthly work sessions to discuss broader planning topics, such as the comprehensive plan or zoning ordinance amendments. There are no minutes taken at these meetings. They are sim-

ply discussions – often quite lively – with no action taken. This format allows commissioners to freely discuss issues in an informal setting. It also provides a time for them to get to know one another better. As such, they learn to accept each other's opinions and not to take differences of opinion personally. Occasionally, we add a "fun" team-building activity to the mix. While the meetings are publicly posted and open to anyone, rarely does anyone other than staff and the commissioners attend.

Lee Krohn:

At one point in years past, when our planning board and I were (literally and figuratively) under serious attack, we planned a separate set of work sessions with an organizational management consultant to regroup, clarify, and reconfirm roles and responsibilities.

In accordance with the law, we noticed all of these publicly. We decided to hold them in a different location than our usual meetings to help stimulate fresh thinking. As anticipated by the consultant, the early public intrigue and interest quickly passed as the audience realized that these were internally focused work sessions with little of actual public interest. It all worked well, and helped get us back on a positive track.

On Orienting New Board Members –

Lee Krohn:

It is important for staff to provide an orientation for all new board members on all aspects of process and product: from things like the mechanics of meeting schedules and the timing of staff memos, to broader issues such as board responsibilities and priorities for the coming year.

Carolyn Braun:

We also meet with the new commissioner, explain the format and content of meetings, provide copies of documents – such as the comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance – and provide information about current projects and policy discussions.

Glynis Jordan:

We hold an orientation meeting, but try not to overwhelm the new person with a room full of people. We'll cover basic things such as the jurisdiction of the board, and an explanation of the staff's role. We probably don't spend enough time explaining how to conduct oneself or what to do at a meeting.

I've found that new board members often have difficulty putting their arms around exactly what they are charged with. Most come in familiar with responsibilities they'll have in reviewing site specific projects. But it is rarer for new members to have thought about the responsibilities they have as planning board members to the broader community.

Obviously, there's also a learning curve for most new members. Interestingly, new members often learn quickest by observing how their fellow board or commission members act, and what they ask at meetings. Therefore it's important to understand the power that more experienced members hold, often unknowingly. How they respond to staff and the public, their view of their role as stewards of the community, and their pride in serving on the commission – all of these things strongly pave the way for the learned behaviors of the new members. So it's not necessarily staff who are the principal teachers! ♦