

Is Planning a Household Word in Your Community?

by Elaine Cogan

Your planning commission has finally updated the community's comprehensive plan. After untold late night meetings, controversy, and compromise, you have approved the requisite maps and text that will guide planning decisions for some time to come. It is tempting to sit back and enjoy the lull until the next major development or zoning proposal comes your way. But by engaging citizens in planning when there are no deadlines or big issues to confront you can reap many benefits. Here are some ideas.

Nearly every community has street fairs, festivals, or celebratory events where citizens come together in a convivial atmosphere to meet and greet and enjoy each other's company. If tables or booths are available for groups to display materials or give out information, many cities take these opportunities to display their wares. Park departments show sketches of possible new or renovated facilities, schools have handouts about special programs, public works promotes recycling or conservation. Too often, however, planning is not represented even though its work affects everyone in the community in one way or another.

Join in the fun and be creative. Show photos or drawings of the different types of housing you want to encourage. Ask people to stick colored pins in that comprehensive plan map you labored over so intensely, showing where they work and live. Connecting the dots can show commuting patterns in an interesting way. Distribute a short questionnaire. ("On a scale of one to five, with five being most important, which issues concern you most about our town... traffic congestion, lack of bike and walking paths, changing character of downtown, etc."). The answers may surprise you and can be the beginning of community dialogue.

Consider displaying information in malls, markets, or libraries. The key is to know your community and meet and greet people where they are likely to congregate.

BY ENGAGING CITIZENS
IN PLANNING WHEN
THERE ARE NO DEADLINES
OR BIG ISSUES TO
CONFRONT YOU CAN REAP
MANY BENEFITS.

Take planning to the public in other ways, as well. Put together a speech, possibly accompanied by slides, on the benefits of planning to your community, and notify service and civic clubs that planning commissioners are available for short presentations. Staff can help with the displays and the contents of the questionnaires and speeches, but the message is most powerful when citizens such as yourselves talk to other citizens. You see firsthand the values and benefits of good planning and are donating your time to share these insights with others. You may be challenged by a few naysayers, but most will be receptive to your message.

Take planning to the schools. Nearly every elementary, middle, or high school curriculum has a study unit on the local community. Make inquiries and you will find teachers who will welcome a speaker about planning. Some will carry it further and ask their students to undertake a related project, such as designing a park or an ideal residential street.

Offer an incentive to participation by displaying student work at City Hall and your local library. Never forget the media. They love kids, especially if you offer to set up "photo opportunities" or human interest stories. Essays, table

models, or plans developed by school children are great attention getters. In one Oregon community, high schoolers wrote and produced a rap song about improving their community that was promoted on TV and radio. Such publicity has the added benefit of sending the planning message to parents, grandparents, and other adults in your community.

Engage in "conversations" about planning issues in your local newspaper or radio talk shows. This is another way to show that those, such as you and your fellow board members, who are entrusted with planning decisions, are open to other points of view.

Reach out to people for whom English is not their first language. They often are affected by planning decisions on which they have little influence. Enlist interpreters and community leaders to help you discuss planning with them and you will help cement relations with still another vital part of your community.

Everything suggested in this column asks even more of your personal time, and as a planning commissioner you certainly give more than your share. However, widening your horizon on the values of engaging the public outside the hearing room can help you make those tough decisions with even more confidence and knowledge. ♦

Elaine Cogan, partner in the Portland, Oregon, planning and communications firm of Cogan Owens Cogan, is a consultant to many communities undertaking strategic planning or visioning processes. Her column regularly appears in the PCJ.

