

# Welcome to the Tightrope Act

by Della Rucker, AICP, CECd

*Editor's Note: We're pleased that planner and economic development consultant Della Rucker will be joining us as a contributing writer. For more about Rucker and what she'll be covering, see our interview – posted on the PlannersWeb.<sup>1</sup>*

## FIND YOUR BALANCING POLE

"You planning commissioners should stop getting in the way of business."

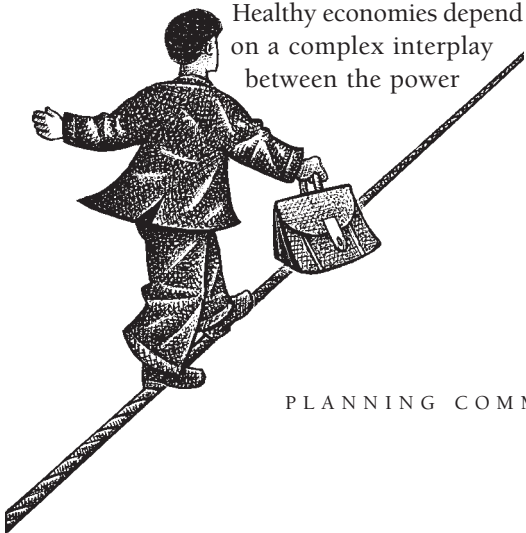
"You know, you people on the planning commission can't really make anything happen anyways. You all just react."

If you're reading this journal, I bet you have heard one or both of these lines before – probably after a decision someone didn't like. My 8-year old, with his exhaustive knowledge of "How to Spot a Bully in the Making," would understand what's going on here. When the economy isn't where we all want it to be, hitting the planning commission's ability, or lack of ability, to foster economic improvement is a bit of a sucker punch. And it reflects the oversimplified assumptions that many people have about how local economies (and planning commissions) work.

Anyone saying either of those lines has it wrong. What you do as a planning commissioner has a huge impact on your local economy, and your community needs you to make those tough decisions.

Your impact is critical because you are the ones who are thinking about the future, not just about today's demands.

Healthy economies depend on a complex interplay between the power



of the market and the often quiet, sometimes vocal, needs of the community. It's not a linear equation. It's a dynamic, constantly-changing interplay between market forces and community needs. And as a planning commissioner, you are standing in center ring. So go find your balancing pole – the tightrope isn't getting any thicker.

## PLANNING & LOCAL ECONOMIES

There is a reason it's vital that we bring an economic perspective to planning, and vice-versa. As our local economies become increasingly unable to depend on financial support from state and federal agencies, and as we continue to deal with the unintended consequences of past planning decisions, it becomes more and more important for us to proactively safeguard our communities' local and regional economic health.

More than ever, we need to have planning decision-making that builds economic robustness and fiscal sustainability, and we need to make economic decisions that create growth and improve quality of life for the community as a whole. Places and their economies are not separate islands – one is entirely dependent on the other. We know that today more than ever before.

As a result, it's critical that planning decisions anticipate and address the community's long-term economic needs. I think that decisions made explicitly to protect a community's economic health are also becoming more justifiable than ever because of the erosion of financial assistance from the federal and state governments.

This is why planning commissioners and their staff are so critical. You are where planning and economic development come together. Your role is tougher

than either planning or economic development alone. You are responsible for making decisions that bolster the long-term health, vitality, and resilience of the community to which you give your time and effort.

## ON THE HIGH WIRE

Planning commissions don't always have the ideal tools to work with. The planning documents that you are required to base your decisions on are too often disconnected from the economic realities that you know in your lives. How much of the new commercial development shown on the future land use map does your community actually need? How much can it support?

Similarly, economic development can too easily fall into the penny wise-pound foolish category. If you permit that development, how much is it going to cost to provide water, police, snowplowing, etc.? Is it going to generate enough income to cover those costs, or are we creating future budget shortfalls?

For many communities, the planning commission is the last line of defense against bad ideas, no matter where they come from. It is your diligence, and sometimes your willingness to go out on the high wire without a net, that sets the stage for your community's future.

What you do is about more than setbacks and landscaping. Your unique role is to connect the dots between the physical and functional environment we create today, and the economy that you and your neighbors will face tomorrow. ♦

*Della Rucker is the Principal of the Wise Economy Workshop, a consulting firm that assists local governments and nonprofit organizations with the information and processes for making wise planning and economic development decisions.*



<sup>1</sup> The interview is available at: [http://pcj.typepad.com/planning\\_commissioners\\_jo/2011/04/rucker.html](http://pcj.typepad.com/planning_commissioners_jo/2011/04/rucker.html).