

# Leading the Commission

by Elaine Cogan

This month's column is especially written for planning commission chairs. It also should be helpful to commission members who suffer through poorly run meetings or may be future chairs.

The planning process suffers if the chair is either weak and unfocused or too strong and intimidating. An alert and united commission can work to overcome such shortcomings, but it is an uphill and never-ending battle.

First, a word about the use of the designation "chair" rather than chairman, chairwoman, or chairperson. All are in common use, and all are correct. However, the neutral term "chair" is more in keeping with similar terms for other leadership positions such as administrator, president, and chief executive officer.

Most of us know good leadership when we see it, though we may not be able to define its exact qualities. One easy clue is attendance. If the commission has an effective chair, members will not be absent very often because too many productive and important decisions will be made without them.

Another sign of problems is when there is little or no discussion on major issues. If this happens consistently, the leader's style may either have bored or bullied the other commissioners into apathy or submission. Either way, the process is in trouble. It is far better to have more discussion about important matters than less, no matter how heated the debate.

Still another indicator of poor leadership is the behavior of staff. If the professionals seems to take over the meeting so that the chair is just the ceremonial or titular head, the commission is not fulfilling its proper role as the citizens' voice on planning issues. On the other hand, if

staff is always meek and passive, either the chair is keeping the commission from having the benefit of professional assistance, or you have the wrong staff.

What, then, are the principles of effective leadership that you should follow

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if you are a planning commission chair? As chair, you should:

- Be conversant with all the issues under discussion; but you need not be an expert in any. In fact, knowing too many technicalities may get in the way of encouraging laypeople to express themselves, which is the role you are expected to play.

- Always show fairness and leave personal opinions behind, except when it is time to vote. If you must speak out, turn over the gavel to your vice chair. But if you do that too often, your ability to be an unbiased presiding officer will be questioned. Fairness also means you give everyone a chance to speak and deal quickly and decisively with those who try to dominate the discussion.

- Disdain the trappings of power. The gavel is all you should need to keep order, and it should be used sparingly. Neither request, nor countenance special consideration from staff or from anyone else.

- Maintain the proper balance between formality and informality. Many

people still like to be called by their last names, but first names are acceptable if you know them well or it is in your community's style. Never exhibit the negative paternalism inherent in calling women or members of minority groups by their first names when you address others formally.

- Display energy and enthusiasm, even at a hearing that has dragged on into the early morning hours. Of course, a good leader will not have allowed the meeting to go on that long, but in any event, you must always strive to be upbeat and positive, fair and courteous.

- Use praise unsparingly. A good leader does not need praise; a good leader dispenses it, but always sincerely. There should be much to laud: staff work on a particularly difficult or onerous issue; public testimony that is fair and non-belligerent on a contentious subject; forbearing and intelligent discussion among the commissioners.

- Stimulate and synthesize the group process without overwhelming it. You should always, figuratively at least, be looking to the right and the left and keeping your antennae out for verbal and non-verbal signals from the commission, staff, and the public. As chair, you should be able to move the group more often to consensus than to a win/lose posture.

Most of all, a good planning commission chair enjoys the role and realizes that tomorrow is another opportunity to exert enlightened and informed leadership. ♦

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