

Enhancing Your Commission's Productivity

by Michael Chandler

Do you recall the Aesop's fable about a poor farmer who owns a pet goose that suddenly starts laying a single golden egg each morning? Very quickly the farmer becomes wealthy, as well as greedy. As the story continues, the farmer decides to kill the goose in anticipation of finding many golden eggs. To his dismay, however, the goose contains no golden eggs — and the farmer slowly comes to realize that he will never get another golden egg.

What does this children's tale have to do with planning commissions? If we draw an analogy from it, we can equate the comprehensive plan (and other tasks accomplished by a planning commission) with the golden eggs, and the planning commission itself with the goose. Viewed in this light, we can see that while the visible measure of a commission's effectiveness is what it produces, the commission's capacity to produce must be nourished if it is to continue to be an effective producer.

The balance of this column will address three basic strategies that can help improve your planning commission's capacity to be productive.

1. NEW MEMBER ORIENTATION

One of the best ways to improve or maintain a planning commission's productive capacity is to provide new appointees with a solid orientation immediately upon appointment. The orientation should cover some combination of the following topics: the commission's role, including duties and responsibilities, how the commission is organized, how the commission works, a review of the commission's structure, policies and bylaws, and a review of the commission's relationship with citizens, staff, developers, and the governing body.

In addition to this organizational overview, new commissioners should be

introduced to the planning process. At a minimum, all new appointees should receive a copy of the locality's comprehensive plan and all related ordinances. Following a reasonable length of time, the commission chair should visit with new appointees to answer any questions they may have. Although this approach takes time, the dividend is substantial because newcomers will more quickly feel a part of the commission.

2. MISSION STATEMENTS

In my previous column, I discussed the idea of an annual "check-up" for the commission. The premise underscoring this was rather simple: successful organizations know where they are and, more importantly, where they are headed.

A key attribute of knowing where an organization is headed (using a principle common to the business world) involves beginning with the end in mind. An organization's mission statement helps to assure that the end is always kept in mind.

Planning commissions should develop a mission statement because they need to define for their clients (and for themselves) what they are doing and why. A mission statement will also prove invaluable if it captures the community's values, as well as its vision. Finally, a properly drawn mission statement will serve as a constant reminder of what the commission, and the community, want to accomplish.

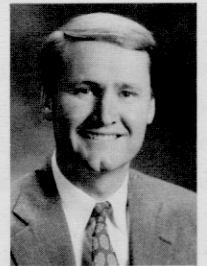
3. WORK PROGRAMS

Another important strategy a planning commission can employ to maintain or improve its operational effectiveness involves the development of an annual work program. Definitionally, a work program is a listing of all the activities an organization hopes to accomplish during a given period of time, tied to specific operating dollars. In some respects the work program functions as an accounting tool for it notes how much money and/or staff

time will be expended on what items.

Once adopted, a work program details what the commission will work on during the year. By clearly setting out what the commission intends to accomplish, a work program will provide an ongoing referent or rally point by which the commission can measure its progress. Having a work program not only better assures that a commission will accomplish its tasks, but also increases the odds that it will be working on items that are of real importance to the community. ♦

Michael Chandler is an Associate Professor and Community Planning Extension Specialist at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. Mike also regularly conducts planning commissioner training programs. His column appears in each issue of the *Planning Commissioners Journal*.



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