

It's Time to Discuss the "P" Word

by Elaine Cogan

Polls show that "politicians" are held in very low esteem by the electorate and yet most incumbents are re-elected. Many citizens have a difficult time reconciling the need to be governed from the desire to be free from government interference.

Local planning commissioners and their staffs are among the few regulatory bodies with which citizens are in touch. Planning board members are appointed by political bodies. Are you, then, a "politician"?

If a majority of the following apply, you can be sure you are in politics.

- You are accosted in the supermarket by strangers who press their case about a particular zoning or planning matter.
- You are cornered at a party by a friend who does the same.
- You are reminded gently by the mayor or a city councilperson of a favor you might return by leaning in a certain direction on a matter coming before the planning commission.
- You are mentioned critically in a news story or editorial in the local paper or on television.
- Your children come home from school with stories about what other children or their parents are saying about you.

Whether or not you accept the title, "politician," as a member of the planning board, you certainly are an important actor in the political processes of your community. The following precepts are not written down in any code of ethics or required of planning commissioners before they take office. To some extent, they can be modified by circumstances in each community. Still, they may be useful if you wonder how to conduct yourself in what is surely a political environment.

Always strive to serve the public interest. This seems obvious but may not be that easy, especially if you find that other office-

holders do not share your definition of the public interest. It can be lonely and unpleasant opposing your friends or the people who appointed you, but sometimes your conscience demands this. Of course, if you find that you are generally on the losing side of important issues, you may have to examine your interpretation of the public interest.

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Listen to all the people and not just those who fit into a neat stereotype of "desirable citizen." Worst traits often come out at a public zoning or planning hearing. But angry, obstreperous or noisy people are not necessarily wrong. Neither are minorities who do not speak English well or understand bureaucratic procedures. It is important to give polite attention to everyone — people you may not want as friends or neighbors, newcomers as well as those whose forebears settled the place.

Take part in partisan politics only if you are prepared to lose. Planning issues touch the lives of many people in your community and you perform your job best if you are perceived to be objective and fair-minded. If you publicly back the mayor's campaign for re-election, accept the reality that some people might interpret subsequent actions on the planning board to be

politically motivated. Be prepared to step down if the mayor loses, unless you have become such a valuable community icon that the new officeholder cannot do without you.

Understand that planning and politics may not be compatible. Politics has been described as the art of the possible, and as such it is often short-range and concentrated on actions that can be accomplished during the term of office of those in power. Good planning is often long-range, reaching far beyond the next election. Being an effective planner may require you to oppose superficially attractive but potentially damaging actions espoused by some of your best friends, those elected officials.

Keep a sense of perspective. You did not campaign for this office; it pays you nothing and requires long hours and little thanks. Moreover, half the town is likely to be angry about your next decision. If you find yourself grouching most of the time, you probably should not continue being a planning commissioner. If, however, you are satisfied that you are doing the job that needs to be done and do not mind the heat, you are probably more a politician than you thought you were. ♦

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