

Planning from Different Perspectives

by Carolyn L. Braun

As a former planning commissioner, member of a regional development commission, member of a county board of adjustment, applicant making a land use request, and now professional planner, I have, at different times, applied for, presented, and decided land use requests. Understanding the different perspectives that applicants, commissioners, and staff “bring to the table,” can enhance the quality of local decision-making and increase the credibility of the planning commission.

FACING FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS

As planning commissioners, I’m sure you have heard difficult requests from friends or neighbors that do not comply with the code. It is hard not to be empathetic with your neighbors. They stand

before you, looking at you, hoping you — of all people — will understand and help them. After all, you live there. Silently, you wonder whether granting the request would be that bad. After all, it really wouldn’t hurt anyone. What’s a couple of feet in the greater scheme of things?

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Similarly, you may be called on to decide applications that have evoked strong neighborhood opposition. This time, many friends and neighbors may be standing before you. One by one they make impassioned pleas against the proposal. Once again, you are in a difficult position. Silently, you wonder how you can approve this request with so many people in opposition. How could this possibly be best for the community? How could all of these people be wrong? Would I feel the same way if I lived next to this development?

Your staff, though they may empathize with your friends and neighbors, is usually not under the same pressure as you. While both your job’s and staff’s is to review projects to determine whether they comply with the code — staff does not make the final decision. You do.

It is tempting as a commissioner to simply make a popular decision. It has been my experience, however, that in the long run, consistent decisions give you more credibility. Rest assured, it won’t always be easy. Staff, on the other hand, would do well to remember how difficult it is for a commissioner to sit on the other

side of the table, facing friends and neighbors, and vote against them.

THE APPLICANT’S VIEWPOINT

I remember approaching the podium to face “those people up front,” hoping I would be able to speak and grateful that the podium hid my knocking knees. Now, as a planning director, I find myself playing “coach” to nervous applicants. Often the applicant doesn’t really understand why board action is required. Combined with unfamiliarity with the process, it can be quite intimidating. As commissioners and staff, you can assist the applicant by explaining the process and the outcome. Frequently I call applicants after the meeting to make sure they understand what happened. It’s surprising how often they misunderstand the board’s action.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Planning commissioners may well be unaware of the amount of time that staff spends in dealing with major or controversial requests. Staff may have met and talked numerous times with neighbors and the applicant to resolve the issues. In essence, staff often “lives and breathes” these requests for months at a time. In fact, I think staff members often become so involved with a request that they fail to pass on small, but important, details or other information, simply assuming that it is common knowledge. They forget that the commissioners only deal with these requests for one or two days a month.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

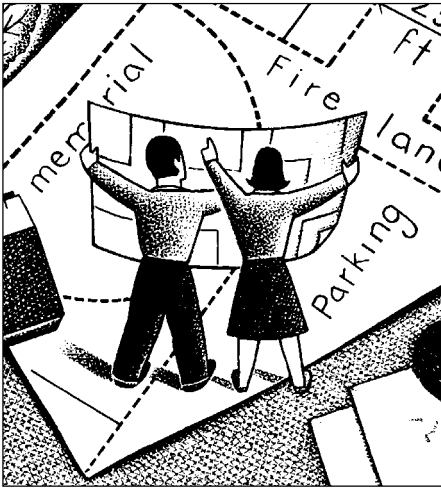
That brings me to another important issue. As you review or listen to land use requests, do you have enough information to make a good decision? Do you have any questions? If so, do you ask them? As a commissioner, I know there were many times when I wished I had asked more questions. Remember, the only “dumb” question is the one you don’t ask.



On-Line Comment:

As chair of my town’s planning commission, I found Ms. Braun’s piece to be insightful indeed! I can surely relate to the dilemmas regarding friends and neighbors applications. In my town, we don’t even have the benefit of input from any staff. The most difficult situation I face is having applicants call me at home prior to a hearing. Usually, they want me to tell them if their plan will be acceptable to the commission IN ADVANCE, even though the phone call is the first time I have heard any details. I struggle to be noncommittal and to explain that they should consult the regulations. Before each hearing is opened I tell the commission all the details of any conversation I had with the person and ask if they were also contacted. It is difficult to keep all this separate, since several of the other commissioners are natives of our town and are often related to the applicant or have some history regarding them. My experience agrees with Ms. Braun’s statement that “in the long run, consistent decisions give you more credibility.”

— Ralph J. Montefusco, South Hero, Vermont



Have you read the agenda packet ahead of time and prepared for the meeting? As you prepare and find you need additional information, do you ask staff to get it for you?

I'm certainly not saying that you should have all your questions answered and your mind made up before the meeting. However, if staff can gather additional information to assist the process, it will benefit the commission, the staff, and, in many cases, the applicant. For instance, you may want to refresh your memory regarding a previous similar request. Often locating this type of information requires "digging" in archived files. Staff can either supply the information to you before or at the meeting. Or, you may have some information that staff is not aware of. If so, pass it on. All of this information can be very useful in making good, consistent decisions. ♦

Carolyn L. Braun is planning director for the city of Anoka, Minnesota (population 17,500). Prior to this, she was a project planner with the city of Minnetonka, a suburb of Minneapolis-St. Paul. Braun has also served as a planning commissioner for thirteen years, eight as chair.

