Commissioners as Neighborhood Advocates

by William M. Harris

Planning commissioners are expected to guide the construction and interpretation of the comprehensive plan, and to employ implementation tools such as zoning and subdivision regulation to ensure orderly development.

When commissioners are viewed as promoting their own interests, however, citizens may legitimately wonder about the fairness of the process, and feel vulnerable. In my experience, this includes situations where commissioners become advocates for their own neighborhood.

Each planning commissioner is, obviously, the resident of some neighborhood. Understandably, each commissioner also wants his or her neighborhood to be the best possible. The difficulty is when commissioners, charged with implementing community-wide policies, find them in conflict with what their own neighborhood wants.

Commissioners are not unlike other citizens when it comes to a preference for keeping certain uses out of their neighborhood — even if such uses may be consistent with the comprehensive plan and the overall welfare of the community. Let me give two examples:

An applicant wishes to locate a home for people with AIDS in a neighborhood. Two such facilities already exist in this neighborhood because of its convenient location to a major hospital. The comprehensive plan allows such facilities. A planning commissioner who lives in this neighborhood argues against locating another such home in the area. The commissioner's rationale is that other parts of the city should share the siting of these facilities. The commissioner has lobbied hard for her point of view, including speaking to members of the city council, to other residents of the area, and to other members of the planning commission.

The second example involves a neigh-borhood in a university town. The area located near the college consists of a mixture of rental and owner-occupied units. The commissioner lives in an owner-occupied home in the neighborhood. A developer files a rezoning request that would allow for a high-density building

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that would be rented primarily to students. Traffic counts show that the area can accommodate this higher density development. Even though the staff recommends the rezoning, the commissioner rallies his neighbors and some members of city council to block the proposal. His name appears in a local newspaper advertisement that encourages the commission and city council to reject the rezoning application.

The actions of the two commissioners in these examples may not violate any ethical standards. However, both commissioners are clearly acting as advocates for their own neighborhood. They are certain to draw criticism not just from the applicants, but from those who expect commissioners to be impartial citizen planners focused on the best interests of the community as a whole.

Having been a planning commissioner for almost ten years, it seems to me that aggressive advocacy by a commissioner is not to be encouraged, especially when the commissioner has a stake in the outcome — including how a project may affect the commissioner's own neighborhood. In a democratic process where commissioners are in leadership roles in their community, great care must be taken to protect the integrity of the position. Respect is earned by demonstrating fairness to all within the framework of public policy.

This is not to say that commissioners, through the comprehensive planning process, should not try to improve the quality of neighborhoods — including their own. However, each commissioner needs to be guided by what is in the best interests of the entire community. Ideally, commissioners will seek to ensure that all neighborhoods share in the benefits and burdens associated with different land uses. When this occurs, public support for the commission's work will be high. ◆

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