

Meeting Formats Should Follow their Functions

by Elaine Cogan

Associating with planning can often put you on the cutting edge of innovation and creativity in your community. Why, then, are so many Planning Board meetings overly long and boring? From years' of observation, it seems to me that members too often blindly follow precedent, or strict legal construction, without making sure that the format of each meeting serves the functions it performs.

Previous columns have addressed many factors that contribute to having a productive meeting. Today, we are starting at the beginning: the agenda. A poorly thought out and sloppily executed agenda can hinder the smooth operating of your meeting, while a carefully designed one that is followed closely can be a distinct help. Consider the following:

1. Plan. It may seem like an oxymoron to suggest that planning bodies need to plan their agendas carefully, but the rule is too often violated. Naturally, you have to respond to special circumstances that must be expedited, but you also need to have time for long-range, or more visionary, planning. Setting aside time on your agenda for dealing with vital, though not necessarily urgent, planning concerns will assure that you do not always live for the present.

2. Distribute the agenda and background materials well in advance of the meeting. The quality of the discussion will be enhanced many fold if members, and the public, have the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the subjects under discussion. Refuse to take up anything, other than bona fide emergencies, if you have not been briefed beforehand. Some board members will never read anything they receive in advance, but they may change their ways when the substantive discussion proceeds without them.

3. Have sufficient copies of the agenda and background material for the public. Do not skimp on the number of handouts as this is a surefire way to set up a we/they environment where only the planning board or those who come early are privy to what is going on. It is helpful if the chair reminds people of the page or section they are following.

4. Start and end on time. Where is it written that planning board meetings need to start late and continue to the wee hours of the morning when everyone is exhausted and the worst decisions are likely to be made? Set a time limit at the onset and begin no more than five minutes late. Discipline yourselves and the public, and be willing to continue to another time if necessary.

5. Allow ample and early time for issues on which the public wants to participate. Who says the agenda always has to follow the "minutes, announcements, old business, new business" format? If a large group of people show up for only one item, put it close to the beginning of the agenda and give them the opportunity to comment before they are too worn out and grouchy from watching you go through the less interesting (to them) or pro forma parts of the agenda. The quality and decibel level of the public discussion will be noticeably improved.

6. Set aside "quality time" for important planning board matters. Just as you need to give the public its due, so also do not neglect the importance of discussing issues when you are all fresh and ready. That is still another reason to reorder the agenda.

State the ground rules. Before every meeting, the chair should review the agenda and remind everyone of the rules for discussion and public testimony and

comment. You may ask for pro and con arguments, taken in turn, or limit remarks to no longer than three or five minutes. Whatever the rules, state them clearly and enforce them for everyone.

7. Be polite to each other and the public at all times. Unfortunately, tempers can flare when you are dealing with difficult issues or hostile people. Still, there is no excuse for rudeness and name-calling. Set the tone by your behavior to one another and be willing to call a halt to a meeting when the public persists in violating those standards.

8. Discuss only one issue at a time. The easiest way to prolong a meeting unnecessarily is to allow commissioners or the public to get off on a tangent. If the chair does not quickly steer the discussion back on track, the commissioners should take the initiative. By disciplining yourselves, you set an example for public behavior.

9. Know the rules of order but use them wisely. Robert's, Roberto's, Robert's, whatever you use, can get you out of trouble but also stifle a creative and worthwhile discussion. Only when you are making legally binding decisions should it be necessary to be strict constructionists.

10. Have fun. The purpose of all the points stated above is to help you enjoy your time on the planning board and obtain satisfaction, not only from the decisions you make, but how they are made. ♦

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