

Dealing With an Angry Public

by Debra Stein

Contrary to popular belief, angry citizens are not an inevitable and unavoidable part of the decision-making process. With a little advance planning, and some subtle interpersonal tactics, you can avoid triggering citizens' negative emotions and prevent nasty behavior that disrupts good governance.

Don't Make 'Em Mad

Citizens often feel angry when they are frustrated — that is, when they want something and think you are unfairly preventing them from getting it. You can minimize the sense of disappointment and resulting anger by making certain that citizens have realistic expectations: “The hearing on the proposed shopping center isn't going to come up on the agenda for at least another two hours.” At a public hearing, the chair should describe the agenda and sequence of events, tell the audience when they'll have an opportunity to speak, and set the ground rules regarding testimony topics or time limits.

People are less likely to feel angry when they understand that their frustration

isn't the result of unfair or arbitrary action. It's particularly important to explain the appropriate rules when it looks like some people are being granted special rights: “Our adopted rules provide that the project sponsor has fifteen minutes to describe the application, and members of the public are then allowed three minutes apiece.”

People get angry when they feel manipulated, ignored, insulted, made to look ridiculous, or treated in a condescending manner. While it is always important to treat citizens with the respect they deserve, it's especially critical to do so in potentially volatile situations. Use active listening techniques to show that you really care what the speaker is saying. Refer to speakers in a courteous manner (“...as we heard from neighbors like Dr. Garcia and Mrs. Lee ...”). Covering your lips is often a signal of contempt or rejection, so keep your hands away from your face when listening.

Keeping Nasty Behavior Under Control

Just because a citizen feels angry doesn't mean he or she necessarily needs to behave in an angry manner. There are several practical steps you can take to avoid hostile conduct even when emotions are running high.

You can start by explaining at the beginning of the meeting (or before a controversial item comes up) that the commission always values civility and does not welcome rude or hostile remarks.

People are also more likely to behave badly when they think they're just anonymous members of a faceless crowd. You

can minimize aggressive behavior by making it easier to identify individuals and hold them responsible for their own anti-social actions. Use name tags in a group setting. Have speakers introduce themselves before testifying. Call on citizens by name and avoid referring to the audience as an anonymous entity (“You guys are all ...”).

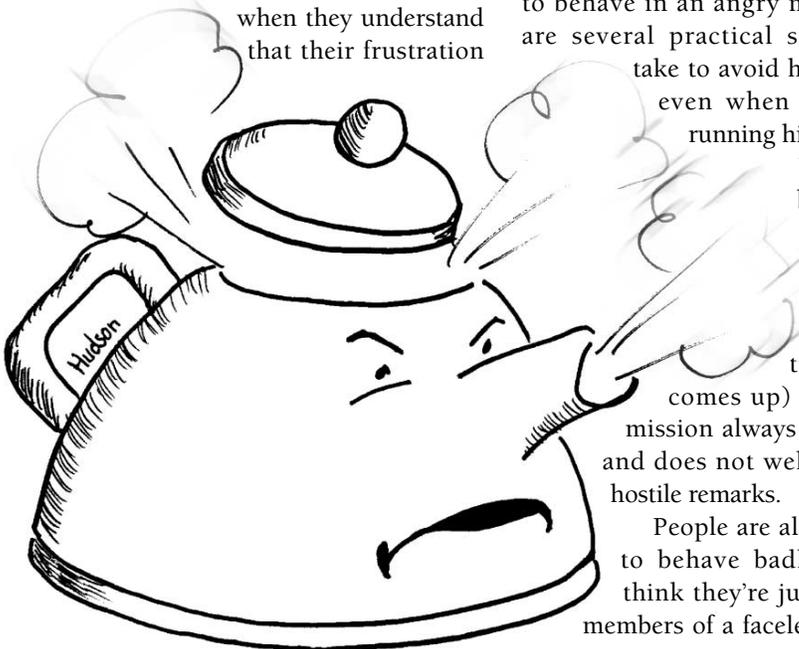
Keeping Cool When Things Get Hot

Even your best efforts to avoid unpleasant emotions and head off nasty conduct may not be enough. When tempers start to fray, you may need step in to cool things down.

First of all, remind citizens that abusive testimony is not allowed and reiterate your intention to enforce those rules. Bring the power of peer pressure into play by reminding speakers that angry tirades make many of their fellow citizens feel uncomfortable and interfere with the audience's efforts to understand what's happening. Be firm, but don't be a bully.

Rather than trying to quash an outburst, it may be helpful to allow an angry citizen to let off some steam. A confrontational attack can be shifted to a more cooperative dialogue simply by asking an angry person to give details about why he or she is so upset. This can calm the person down, and may yield information that will be of value to the planning board members.

You can often respond to an angry tirade simply by acknowledging part of it. For example, you can accept one element of the attack while denying another (“I agree that placing homeless shelters in residential neighborhoods can pose serious problems, but I think we can address those problems”). Or you might agree to the possibility the speaker may be right (“You could be right about that, but we need to hear from others at tonight's meeting”).



Under some circumstances you may wish to attack the use of attacks. First, show you understand the substantive content of what the citizen is trying to get across: "I understand that you don't want this factory next to the school ...". Next, comment on the unacceptable manner in which the issue was presented "... but it's not appropriate to shout at the Zoning Board or call board members names." You can then insist the citizen behave in a more cooperative manner, by noting that neither you nor any other party is going to engage in such unpleasant behavior. A word of caution, however: don't expect to placate an angry citizen by engaging in a counterattack. While attacking the use of attacks can neutralize the impact of an angry individual on the rest of the audience and encourage others to refrain from aggressive behavior, the target of your rebuke may feel shamed and become even angrier.

SUMMING UP:

Dealing with anger means more than just reacting when people start protesting; it means planning ahead to anticipate and avoid problems. Ask yourself: what is it about this project or situation that might trigger negative emotions like frustration or loss of face? Know the facts and explain the rules so citizens don't start feeling like they're being treated unfairly.

Just because citizens feel angry doesn't mean they have to behave in an aggressive manner. Think about what you're going to do once people start losing their cool: you can firmly enforce the rules, allow angry people to vent, ask for more, agree in part, or even attack the use of attacks. With a strategic approach and some advance planning, you can help provide for civil discussion and debate on contentious matters. ♦

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Online Comments:

"I have rarely found it productive when a public official at the dais in a public hearing tries to have a 'cooperative dialogue' with an emotional speaker. Usually, these dialogues become arguments, and disrupt the flow of the hearing. ... If you know a hearing is going to be hostile, set clear ground rules and enforce them (e.g., time limits, no personal attacks, no applause or boos from the audience).

We have also used an 'open house' to precede some complex and/or controversial hearings to try to diffuse the tension and confusion at the formal public hearing. The open house is advertised just as the public hearing is. At the open house, staff is available for about one hour before the hearing in a meeting room near the location for the hearing. We have all the information (maps, copies of zoning changes, etc.) set up and have an opportunity to meet with citizens who need a better explanation of what is going on, or want to 'vent' about things. "

– Wendy Grey, *Planning Director, Tallahassee-Leon County (Florida) Planning Department*

"Dealing with angry citizens is something that isn't talked about very often in the planning literature, yet is a fact of life in most communities. ... I think it's important to have a plan in place if things get really out of control. In Salem, the chair simply calls a recess if it gets too nasty, and this seems to calm things down. I have also had to call the police on two occasions, once when an angry crowd confronted the owner of an adult book store. So it's a good idea to have a telephone in the meeting room and have a prearranged procedure with the police department."

– Ross Moldoff, *Planning Director, Town of Salem, New Hampshire [Moldoff also serves on the PCJ's Editorial Advisory Board]*

"It should be remembered that many in the audience have not been to a commission meeting before. Because of this, they don't know what to expect. They often feel that they must be loud and aggressive in order to be heard. The chair can play a big role in maintaining order and civility by explaining, at the start of each meeting, how the meeting will be conducted. ... explain the agenda, tell the audience when they will have the opportunity to give input, go over the protocol involved in

testifying (i.e., come to the podium, give your name and address) ... Public hostility can emanate from a suspicion of public bodies and the feeling that one may not be treated fairly. An effort to dispel those suspicions at the beginning of a meeting can pay big dividends."

– Gene Moser, *Planning Consultant (and former planning commissioner), Park City, Utah*

"One important point that I would add is the importance of growing a thick skin. It's helpful to remember that although it may sound like anger is directed against you, typically it's really anger at government in general or at others who aren't there. No matter how personal an attack may seem, it's important to not take it personally."

– Gary Feldman, *Chair, Townsend (Massachusetts) Planning Board*

"Acquainting the audience with the rules of procedure at the start of the meeting diffuses the fairness concerns felt by individuals who are asked to complete their comments because they are out of time at the podium. They will have been given the same time constraints as other speakers. The control of the planning commission president over the meeting becomes very important in these situations.

The purpose of rules of procedure is not to prohibit or discourage citizens from partaking in the democratic process, but rather to establish a framework of conduct to allow concerned citizens to voice their concerns in a manner fair to those intending to speak. I have been involved in some meetings where citizens opted not to speak because those with the opposing viewpoint created a hostile and intimidating atmosphere. Everyone deserves an opportunity to be heard regardless of viewpoint."

– Bryan Stumpf, *Planner, HNTB Corporation, Indianapolis, Indiana [Stumpf also serves on the PCJ's Editorial Advisory Board]*



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