

Learn to Speak So People Will Listen

by Elaine Cogan

Have you spoken to a community group or organization lately? There are many benefits when you seek and welcome opportunities to give speeches and presentations. First, you are honing a skill that will hold you in good stead in many other business and professional endeavors. Second, you will get away from the confining environment of the board room and out to where the people meet and congregate. Third, you can make friends for community planning that may carry over into public acceptance of specific policies or projects.

Ask your staff to get out the word that planning commissioners are available and you will find local service, professional, and citizen organizations are hungry for speakers. With the right approach, you can make planning an appealing subject.

Generally, it is best not to focus presentations on burning issues on which people already are taking sides. You need to be especially careful if the issues relate to projects or applications before your commission. A well prepared talk on the value of planning for your community, with specific examples of its efficacy, can be enlightening and interesting. Staff can help you with details, but the style and content should be yours.

The following tips can help assuage anxiety and give you the tools you need to be an effective speaker.

Know your audience. Parents of school-age children at a PTA meeting have different concerns about planning issues than businesspeople at a Chamber of Commerce luncheon; likewise seniors' interests may differ from those of environmentalists. For each presentation, ask your host beforehand what aspects of planning are most likely to interest that specific group and tailor your remarks appropriately.

Choose and use visual aids carefully. Among planners, alas, Powerpoint presentations are ubiquitous and often misused. They can be helpful at commission meetings when staff are explaining a report or recommendation, but inappropriate and boring when the focal point of a speech to a group of citizens. If you do use them, make sure to eliminate or explain all the planning jargon. When referring to boards or charts, never turn your back on the audience.

WITH THE RIGHT APPROACH, YOU CAN MAKE PLANNING AN APPEALING SUBJECT.

Tell stories and anecdotes. Build bridges to your audience by being a friendly and open citizen planner. Share personal experiences. Avoid the temptation to tell jokes that obviously came from a standup comic you heard on TV the night before.

Never read from a prepared script. Outline your presentation with bullet points or short sentences, but do not bury your nose in a many-paged document that is written by you or someone else. While it is important to be organized, it is just as important to be somewhat informal and flexible. Be careful about expressing an opinion on any issue on which the Commission is likely to hold a public hearing and/or vote in the near future.

Understand the importance of nonverbal communication. The audience will size you up as soon as they see you and before you say anything. Before the event, ask yourself how they expect a planning commissioner to look, and dress appropriately. Likewise, be aware of facial expressions, how you use your

hands, and other ways that communicate nonverbally to your audience.

Deal with stage fright. A modicum of nervousness before your speech is to be expected, and even welcome, but do not let it disable you. Be prepared by having an outlined text, rehearsing beforehand, knowing your audience, and arriving early to meet and greet your hosts and others. Take a deep breath, count to ten, sip a glass of cold water, and you will do fine. If they like you, the audience will never know if you inadvertently skip a point or two and will forgive minor glitches.

Follow the schedule. Ask beforehand if you are the main speaker or one of several. Do not exceed the allotted time. Always try to set aside a few minutes for questions.

Answer questions honestly and frankly. Some people may take this opportunity to air their pet peeve about local government that has nothing to do with your subject. Hear them out politely, but do not be shy about saying that is not why you are here today. Never be embarrassed to say, "I don't know," but follow up with "See me afterwards and I'll tell you where to find the information." If a disgruntled questioner persists, say "We will have to agree to disagree on this," and move on.

Always remember that people are convinced by people, not by information. If you have taken all this seriously and are a credible carrier of information, you will be welcomed, listened to, and even invited back! ♦

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FROM THE PLANNING COMMISSIONERS JOURNAL

Now that You're on Board:

How to survive ... and thrive ... as a Planning Commissioner

by Elaine Cogan



Now that You're on Board:

How to survive ... and thrive ... as a Planning Commissioner by Elaine Cogan

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Introduction

Since 1991, Elaine Cogan has been sharing her wisdom and experience with *Planning Commissioners Journal* readers in her column, “The Effective Planning Commissioner.” Elaine has tackled a wide range of subjects with common sense and practical advice.

A few years ago, we asked our columnists what their single most important piece of advice for planning commissioners would be.

Here’s what Elaine (succinctly, as usual) had to say: “Know yourself first, but put yourself last. What does that mean? Be self-critical,

aware of your biases and preferences in terms of the issues the planning board faces. After you

know and understand yourself,

be willing – if needed – to set personal opinions aside

to serve the best interests of your community.”



Inside you’ll find 25 practical tips for planning board members, some condensed from Elaine’s past columns, others new. We hope that Elaine’s insights – along with the sidebar comments from a number of citizen and professional planners – will help you not just “*survive*,” but “*thrive*” on your planning commission.

Wayne Senville – Editor, *Planning Commissioners Journal*