

The Value of Debriefing

by Jim Segedy, Ph.D., FAICP, and Lisa Hollingsworth-Segedy, AICP

Many years ago, Lisa was on the planning staff of a regional planning agency. The morning after the initial public meeting for a joint county-municipal comprehensive plan, the planning director called an impromptu staff meeting. “What worked well?” was her first question. She made notes of our responses on a flip chart using a fat blue marker. After five minutes, she moved to, “What didn’t work well?” In another five minutes, she asked, “What would you like us to do differently for the next public meeting?”

In 15 minutes, we had a list that summarized our experiences and gave us direction. This simple debriefing process was a valuable technique that empowered Lisa and her fellow staff members to recognize success, recount their frustrations, and agree on new approaches for future work.

Jim’s experience with debriefing was somewhat different. When he was on the local planning commission, near the end of each meeting, everyone would look at their watch. One person would move to adjourn, there would be a second, and before the gavel hit the desk we were all outta there. Woe be to anyone who got between the members and the door. At the next meeting it was the same, and nothing ever got any better.

The process of planning commission decision-making requires as much attention as do the decisions themselves. Following up on the meetings and the issues raised is critical – and in the long-run makes for more efficient and effective meetings. Who knows, with enough debriefing and adjusting, those meetings may even finish early!

Debriefing is a technique of “reflective learning” that can be applied one-on-one or in a group setting. It is frequently used in military, medical, and emergency response situations, where

participants use role-playing and simulations of potential events to prepare for circumstances in which decisions affecting life and death must be made quickly.¹ Debriefing enables participants to emotionally process the event and analyze the decisions they made (and their outcomes). This facilitates learning, improving how people respond to future situations.

PERIODICALLY DEBRIEFING MEETINGS WILL LIKELY HELP YOUR PLANNING COMMISSION FIND WAYS TO MAKE THEM MORE EFFECTIVE.

Debriefing is not critique. An important distinction between the two is the flow of information. In a debriefing, all parties are allowed equal time to give and receive information. This differs from a critique, which is generally a one-way flow of information (as when an instructor provides an evaluation of a student’s project).

Another important distinction of debriefing is that it is not just a “gripe session.” Debriefing relies on a specific structure of: (1) recounting events – the what’s and the why’s, (2) dealing with emotions and feelings, (3) analyzing decisions and outcomes, and (4) thoughtfully reflecting and focusing on future situations or practices.²

Debriefing, either formally or informally, can be a valuable tool for planning commissions to use. The debriefing process also helps develop and nurture

the leadership role of senior members of the planning commission, allowing them to share their experience with newer members.

In the following paragraphs, we describe seven different situations in which we think debriefing can benefit planning commissions.

1. *Debriefing through role-playing.* In planning commissioner training workshops, role-playing for various scenarios is often used. Generally, role-plays work best when divided into several parts, with pauses in the action so everyone can identify and discuss procedural, ethical, and legal issues. Both of us have used this process for training planning commissioners. We have also participated in this type of debriefing in AICP ethics training courses.

2. *Preparing for controversial hearings.* Almost all planning commissioners will, at some point, face a very controversial, hotly disputed issue at a public hearing. You may be able to deal better with heated hearings when they arise if you’ve previously role-played how to deal with this situation.

In setting up your role playing scenarios, don’t use the facts or issues from any project currently before you or in the permitting pipeline. That could well raise ethical concerns. If your staff is not familiar with role playing, find someone in the community who is and see if they can help you develop scenarios and work with you on the role playing exercise. Finally, we would suggest trying out role playing in an informal setting (such as during a separate work session or as part of a retreat) where you’re not under time pressure because of other business.³

¹ Other debriefing techniques you may be more familiar with include crime scene reconstruction, course evaluations, and the self-evaluation phase of an annual employment review.

² There are numerous debriefing models. However, common to all are the reflective learning elements of recounting events, emotional processing, analyzing results, and determining alternate courses of action for future situations.

3. *Decompress, process, and learn after a “hot” meeting.* Okay, you’ve just had that heated public meeting. After a long night of controversy, probably the last thing you want to do is stay longer and debrief the meeting. However, this is the best opportunity for debriefing.

According to the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress, the most effective debriefing occurs as soon after the event as possible. While “traumatized” might be an overstatement of how you feel after a hot meeting, taking 10 extra minutes to “wind down” as a group can help you get past the feeling of being “beaten up” and allow you to gain perspective. Decompressing after a hot meeting might also be a good opportunity for the more informal kind of debriefing mentioned later (see #5 below).

4. *Short, routine debriefings.* Consider conducting a basic five-minute debriefing at the end of every meeting, not just the controversial ones. This debriefing provides wrap-up and feedback (both positive and negative) that can improve how future meetings are run. Even if you choose not to debrief every meeting, periodically debriefing them will likely help your planning commission find ways to streamline meetings and make them more effective.

5. *Informal debriefings.* Go out for coffee or a beer after the meeting. We talked about this in an earlier column.³

However, if your intention is debriefing, and not simply building community among the planning commission members, someone will need to be responsible for taking notes and following a bona fide structure for debriefing. If you plan on having this kind of informal post-meeting get together, double-check first with your municipal attorney to make sure you don’t run afoul of Sunshine or Open Meeting legal requirements.

6. *Develop a more fluid working relationship between the staff and planning commission.* If your planning commission has staff, chances are (unless you’re

chair) you only see those folks at your regular or committee meetings. Yet your interaction with them is critical for maximum effectiveness. Their responsibilities and perspectives differ from yours, but you are all a team. A routine debrief between the planning commission and staff (including legal counsel) will help to promote a congenial and effective working relationship. For informal debriefings, also invite them to join you.

7. *Evaluate past decisions.* In a previous column (“How Do We Get There?” PCJ #74, Spring 2009), we suggested an annual review in which the planning commission revisits some of its past decisions to evaluate the effectiveness of its recommendations. Did the decision give the community what you were expecting? Have there been unanticipated outcomes or unintended consequences? How do the results compare to the goals of your comprehensive plan? An annual evaluation and debriefing will help you fine-tune your plan, improve your procedures, and sharpen your focus as a planning commission.

Let’s admit it. You debrief after every meeting. It may be by talking to yourself on the way home, but think of how much more effective – and fun – it would be if you did it with your fellow commissioners. ♦

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For a list of the Segedys’ previous articles published in the Planning Commissioners Journal, go to: www.plannersweb.com/segedys.html.

³ See “Smoothing the Rocky Road,” PCJ #79 (Summer 2010); www.plannersweb.com/wfiles/w401.html.

³ For more on planning commission retreats and their value, see Elaine Cogan, “Retreat, Advance!” in PCJ #26 (Spring 1997); www.plannersweb.com/wfiles/w259.html.

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