

The Words Sounded Familiar

by Michael Chandler

The likelihood is strong that most planning commissioners remember their first commission meeting. I recall rather vividly my initial commission meeting; in part because I had just broken my ankle. My movement was tentative and uncertain as I was unable to coordinate the crutches with my arms and legs. My sense of rhythm — which has never been great — was completely missing. In the words of my youngest child, I moved like a “klutz.”

Once I settled into my seat and the meeting started, it did not take long for me to dismiss the crutches as a problem. In short order, colleagues began using the king's English in a manner that sounded almost foreign. They spoke at length about a PUD and its special relationship to open space. They also spent a fair amount of time talking about floor area ratio and density bonuses. I was perplexed. The words sounded familiar, but they made little sense in the context of the discussion. PUD sounded like a dog running loose in an open field and floor area ratio with density bonus sounded like a carpeting job. But this could not be right. This was a planning commission meeting. What was wrong with me? Was I missing something? What was this language I was hearing and what did it mean?

Fortunately for me, a veteran of the commission took me aside at the conclusion of the meeting and reassured me that all was well. He told me that planners had a language all their own. I would have to learn what was meant one meeting at a time. As my seasoned colleague put it, planning was like learning how to drive: it would take awhile and there would be frustrations along the way; however, I would probably make it.

Sound familiar? I would venture a guess that most commissioners reading this column can relate to my experience.

For a variety of reasons, it seems most people appointed to local planning commissions receive little or no orientation following their appointment. Their success or failure as a commissioner quickly becomes a function of on-the-job learning, adaptation, and personal persistence.

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In May of this year, I met Wayne Senville who edits the *Journal*. After sharing experiences like the one outlined above, Wayne asked me if I would be interested in preparing a regular column for the *Journal* focusing on the “work” of the planning commission. After a brief deliberation I accepted his offer.

Why me you ask? For one reason, I have traveled in the shoes of a commissioner. For three years I served on the Blacksburg, Virginia, Planning Commission — two years as Chairman. During that time, my eyes were opened and my discretion was informed regarding a wide range of planning and planning commission activities. My personal experience convinced me that something should be done to help train persons who give of their time to serve on local planning boards.

In 1985 I co-founded the Virginia Certified Planning Commissioner Program. Designed to provide each participant with a complete introduction to planning and the duties and responsibilities of a plan-

ning commission, the ten week long learning experience has produced more than 500 graduates. In addition to the certification program, over the past several years I have run planning commissioner training workshops in Virginia and a number of other states. Given my experience both as a planning commissioner, and, more recently, as an educator of planning commissioners, I felt that writing a column for the *Journal* made sense.

In future issues this column — as its name says — will focus on the planning commission at work. I'll discuss the planning commission's role in developing a community comprehensive plan, as well as in implementing the plan. Columns will cover topics such as thinking creatively, team building, group processes, “futuring,” and dealing with developers, lawyers, and citizens.

My intention is to make “The Planning Commission At Work” a lively, purposeful and stimulating column. I will look forward to receiving your comments and suggestions. Now allow me to leave you with a thought that I'll build on in the next column:

Destiny should not be a matter of chance, it must be a matter of choice. The future is not a thing to be wished for; it is a thing to be invented.

Michael Chandler is an Associate Professor and Community Planning Extension Specialist at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. Mike “graduated” from his position on the Blacksburg Planning Commission in 1984 when he was elected to the Town Council — an office he has held since then. As Editor, I'm most pleased to welcome Mike to the *Journal*.

