

Staff Needs a Little TLC, Too!

by Elaine Cogan

Effective staff/commissioner relations are vital to the overall success of planning in your community, whether your planning agency has one, ten, or one hundred employees. Good will and an understanding of the pitfalls that impede sound relationships can help you solve any problems that may arise.

Resist the temptation to "micro-manage." After you have been on the job any time at all, you will become more familiar with planning jargon, and the rules and regulations of your community, than most citizens. Still, you are not expected to be a professional planner. Indeed, you would be less effective as a citizen planning commissioner if you were.

Even if you are a successful professional or businessperson, it is not appropriate to try to tell the planning director whom to hire or fire or how you think the agency should be managed. You should have more than enough to do studying the issues and making policy decisions. Besides, a good business approach is not always applicable to government. Play your job well and let the staff know you expect them to do theirs.

Read your homework. Planning staffs are notorious for their propensity to grind out pages of documentation and explanation for even the simplest zoning change. As a planning commissioner, it is important to be aware of everything pertaining to each case that has a bearing on your decision. Oftentimes, however, staff reports include voluminous references to other local ordinances or state laws or are padded with what is called "boilerplate" — material that legally has to be in there, but has no real relevance to the matters under consideration.

If you cannot easily separate the wheat from the chaff, talk to other commissioners. You may find that you all have the same difficulty understanding the written

staff reports. If that is the case, consider asking staff to provide more easy to read material. Never allow staff protests that "it has to be this way" or "it's always been this way" intimidate you into thinking you are lazy or stupid for not understanding their reports. One effective improvement that might meet your need for clarity, while still adhering to legal form, is to request that each set of documents be preceded by an executive summary of no more than two pages. This summary can explain the pertinent issues, outline staff recommendations, and suggest alternative actions the commission may take.

"YOU MAY BE INNOCENT OF ANY IMPROPER MOTIVES, BUT IT IS IMPORTANT TO REALIZE THAT THE STAFF MAY INTERPRET YOUR REQUEST AS A FORM OF INTIMIDATION OR AS A LESS THAN SUBTLE DIRECTIVE TO TREAT YOUR FRIENDS OR RELATIVES DIFFERENTLY..."

If the other commissioners say they have no problem understanding staff reports, ask your planning director for private briefings. Most are willing to take the time necessary to help commissioners do their jobs effectively.

Avoid the appearance of favoritism. It is easier to know what is explicitly legal or illegal than to discern that large grey area — what may be perceived by others as inappropriate.

At social gatherings or at business or professional affairs, do not succumb to the lure of playing the insider's role by even hinting at any proprietary information on

planning matters you may have. Do not contact the planning director or a staff member to suggest they talk to a friend or relative of yours who has an interest in a case you are considering. You may be innocent of any improper motives, but it is important to realize that the staff may interpret your request as a form of intimidation or as a less than subtle directive to treat your friends or relatives differently than other members of the public. Neither is it wise to try to counteract any accusation of favoritism by being so "even-handed" you pester the staff about everyone who comes to you. It is better to keep neutral in all circumstances. Tell people whom they can call about a planning matter, but do not offer to smooth the way by making the call yourself.

Control your public behavior. Never be guilty of berating, downgrading or insulting the staff at a public meeting. Yes, it can be embarrassing if citizens point out apparent errors in staff reports or presentations. The public meeting, however, is not the place to find out what happened or why. If apparently sloppy work occurs repeatedly, it may merit a private discussion with the mayor or city administrator — but in most cases, a quiet discussion with staff away from the public can work out seeming discrepancies or disagreements.

Abusing the staff by making them the target or scapegoat before an angry populace may gain you some transitory public support. In the end, however, it will deteriorate what should be a long-term, mutually respectful relationship.

A simple "thank you — you did a great job last night before that group of hostile homeowners" can be just the right comment to uplift a harassed planning staff when it appears the whole town has taken up arms against them. Take your planning director to lunch. Praise a particular piece of staff work at a public meeting. Write a

continued on page 15

Staff & TLC...

continued from page 3

letter of support to the mayor or city administrator. There are all manner of ways you can – and should — reward your often overworked and undervalued planners.

Form and nurture a partnership. At least once a year, every planning commission should meet with its staff for an honest evaluation of what works and what may not be working as well as it should. This should be the time when you express your expectations, and the planning director and staff speak up about theirs. Be open and willing to change. Some commissions agree to a formal document they review and revise each year. Others rely on notes or minutes. However, no matter what improvements you make and good will you have, accept the fact that there will always be some tension between commissioners and staff; you have different responsibilities and, often, different perspectives. But the sooner you can develop a creative partnership — and the more you can nurture it — the better it will be for everyone.

Elaine Cogan is a partner with the firm of Cogan Sharpe Cogan, Planning and Communications Consultants, Portland, Oregon. Her column appears in each issue of the Planning Commissioners Journal.

Elaine's new book, Successful Public Meetings: A Practical Guide for Managers in Government, has just been released by Jossey-Bass Publishers, 350 Sansome St., San Francisco, CA 94104 (cost is \$23.95, plus \$3 postage). A flier describing the book in more detail is also available by writing Jossey-Bass at the above address.

