

# How Well Do You Use Your Time?

By Elaine Cogan

There are many important planning, zoning and land use issues in your community. You would not be on the planning commission if you were not sincerely dedicated to solving them.

Then, why are you sometimes vaguely dissatisfied that you were pressed into making important decisions prematurely because there "just was not enough time" to do it right? Why does the commission spend hours on minutiae and minutes on policy? Why do you always seem to be playing catch up to meet the schedules of other agencies?

Holding a public hearing until the early hours of the morning after a full meeting on the budget is less an indication of how busy you are and more a symptom of a commission out of control.

Jamming the agenda with personnel matters so that either you take up public testimony when you are too tired to focus intelligently or postpone the hearing and risk the ire of people who have come miles to participate, is neither politically wise nor good management.

Permitting staff to give long, involved reports you would have understood more completely if you could read them yourself reduces the time you have left to make good decisions. Allowing your planning board to be driven by unrealistic deadlines forces you to make incomplete or unwise decisions.

These are some ways you can judge how well your commission uses the precious but limited resource of time:

- How many items are on your typical meeting agenda? In what order are they? If your commission is like most, your agenda is organized in linear or calendar fashion with little or no concern for the amount of time each matter will take. Take a good look at it. Do you always have to start with "old business" before you go on to "new business"? If the public is waiting impa-

tiently to testify on an item that is sixth on the agenda and likely to come up in two hours, be flexible: put it first before they get restless and when you can give it your full attention.

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- Does staff "read" information to you that you could absorb best on your own? Do not accept the excuse that involved technical information can be put "on the record" only if it is recited aloud. The United States Congress allows its members to insert all manner of material into the record without their being present; you certainly can do the same. Moreover, you can be more prepared for discussion on the substance of the issue if you have the information in advance.

- How well does the staff use graphs and charts? One picture is still worth 1,000 words, but only if it is the right picture. Encourage staff to learn and use appropriate graphical techniques to illustrate points that may otherwise consume unnecessary explanatory time. [Editor's Note: For more on this, see Elaine's column, "Using Visual Aids," in Issue 4].

- Do you allow sufficient time to deliberate before you act? When was the last time you engaged in a substantive discussion before you made a decision — a decision that allowed each member to bring

out points of value without feeling rushed? No major decision should be made until after you have had thoughtful and thorough discussion. This is one of the greatest contributions lay commissioners can make to sound planning in their communities.

- How often do you find yourself bound by someone else's deadline? Another agency's? Staff's? Never hesitate to ask the why of deadlines as well as when. If an important matter can be shifted to a more convenient time for discussion, request an extension. If it cannot, make sure there is time for the deliberative discussion noted above.

- How often do you carry over items to another meeting? If that happens nearly every session, you are not making a realistic assessment of your agenda. Look for other ways to handle routine matters such as subcommittees or giving more responsibility to staff.

Lastly, what is your satisfaction/dissatisfaction quotient? Are you spending more time on your commissioner's job and enjoying it less? You are a volunteer. You have many other demands on your attention, probably not the least, a full or part-time job. Yet, you would not have agreed to serve on the planning board if you did not think you had the time. But the critical question is, time for what? Set realistic and reasonable expectations and examine your performance periodically to make time your ally, not your nemesis.

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