We chuckle when we read about diplomats who spend hours or days arguing about the shape of the negotiating table, but we might be more sympathetic if we realized how even the smallest details contribute to the success of public meetings.

Most planning commissions hold their meetings in rooms that are designed — purposefully or not — to intimidate the public. Commissioners sit on a raised dais, often built of fine, imported wood, high above and yards away from anyone who might want to approach them. Even in those communities where the planning commissioners sit at a table on the same level as the public, they usually huddle together in an unmistakable "we/they" attitude. Often, the room is barely large enough for commissioners and staff; the public, standing uncomfortably against the wall or sitting on unmatched chairs, is treated like intruders.

Even the most sanguine of citizens can become upset and cranky when confronted with such unwelcoming environments. Short of knocking out walls or tearing down the building and starting anew, there are many things that can be done to create an atmosphere in which citizens feel welcome.

But first, examine your own motive honestly. Do you and the other commissioners sincerely welcome and encourage citizen input and participation or do you really wish they would all just go away and let you tend to the business to which you were appointed? If you answer yes to the latter, it would be a charade to try to hold your meetings in a more hospitable environment; your body language and other ways of conveying attitudes would give away your true feelings.

If, however, you are at least tolerant toward the average citizen’s comments, there are many things you can do to make each one feel comfortable at your meetings.

The welcoming environment begins with the treatment citizens receive at the door. Always have handouts to help them keep track of what is happening, preferably on a convenient table nearby the entrance. At least, have sufficient copies of the agenda; but be sure it is written in plain English, not the legalese your attorney or staff planners insist upon for formal commission action. For example, in addition to referring to ordinances or motions by number or code, include a simple explanation, such as "proposal to approve building an apartment house at 123 East Main, a single family zone." If you know there will be a crowd of citizens assembled for a particular issue, ask the staff to include in the handouts other explanatory information such as a map or fact sheet. Reader-friendly material should become routine and give the citizen a positive feeling of inclusiveness.

Next, be sensitive to sight lines and other impediments. If the staff is using visual aids such as charts, graphs, overheads or slides, make sure that everyone in the audience can see them. Too often these are oriented only to the planning commissioners. If necessary, rearrange the chairs or the screen. If everything is fixed, invite the audience to move to the side where there is the best view. If none of this is possible, consider duplicating the visuals on handouts. The goal again is to be as inclusive as possible. An audience that can follow the procedures is less likely to disrupt them.

If you are the chair of the meeting, remember to continually paraphrase what is going on or being said. This not only keeps the commissioners on track, but is invaluable to members of the public.

The welcoming environment is reinforced if you treat everyone courteously, no matter how provoked you may be by hostile or uninformed remarks. We have all attended public meetings — for planning or other purposes — where a disgruntled or unhappy citizen has been insulted or maligned by representatives of the public body holding the meeting. Avoid this at all times. You may disagree with what is being said but you must show respect to the person who says it.

Another important indication of a respectful and courteous attitude toward the public is to schedule controversial matters first, or near the top of the agenda, not last, when citizens are worn out and grumpy about having to sit through hours of discussion on other matters that do not interest them. It is perfectly all right to limit discussion, but keep the ground rules simple and announce them at the beginning, repeating as often as necessary. Never change the procedure in mid-stream. For your own sanity, and as a means of giving citizens their due, try to schedule only one controversial issue a meeting.

When you want to settle particularly thorny difficulties with citizens, ask staff to set up a less formal structure such as
GIS can also be used to conduct a "build-out" analysis. For example, the Town of Braintree, Vermont, recently wanted to examine the potential impact of development based on its current plan and ordinances, taking into account various environmental and other constraints. The basic process for the build-out analysis was organized into the following steps: (1) A town-wide GIS layer was created to reflect the currently allowed density of development (for example, 1 acre, 5 acre and 10 acre lots); (2) "Development exclusion" and "development discouragement" GIS layers were prepared; the exclusion layer, for example, included floodplains and land with slopes steeper than 25%; (3) The GIS layers were combined in an overlay in order to identify the developable portions of the town; (4) Calculations were prepared indicating the total number of parcels "available" for development, their median size, and their mean distance from town roads; and (5) Alternative scenarios were prepared, adjusting development densities in different parts of town. The GIS analysis gave Braintree residents a valuable tool for looking at the potential effects of development, as well as a means of seeing how changes in their own local regulations could affect the development potential of their town.

[Editor's Note: Randall Arendt also discussed the value of conducting a build-out analysis in his article "Open Space Zoning" in our July/August 1992 issue, at page 6].

**Computer Mapping versus GIS**

While all geographic information systems include a computer mapping component, not all computer mapping systems are geographic information systems. The key distinction is that GIS integrates computer mapping with a database management system, allowing for detailed spatial analysis. In contrast, most computer or automated mapping systems are designed for map design and production, and not for spatial analysis (some uses of spatial analysis in planning are described later in this article). Automated mapping systems have more tools for designing visually attractive maps with a wide selection of map presentation formats and symbols, but have fewer tools for measurement and modeling.

**Resources:**

The best introductory text on GIS is Geographic Information Systems: An Introduction, by Jeffrey Star and John Estes (Prentice Hall 1990). If you would like more detailed information about any of the projects described in the article, contact Tom Millette at: (413) 566-5552.

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. Among the topics Elaine will be discussing in future columns are:

- The politics of being an effective commissioner.
- How to chair a meeting effectively, and how to best participate if you are not the chair.
- Dealing with difficult people at public meetings.
- How to make written materials clear and comprehensible to the public.