

How to Make Decisions People Will Accept

by Otis White

This is the second in a series of columns about community leadership. The focus of this column is about helping people accept unwanted change.

Your commission has just ruled on a tough variance case, and a crowd is furious about the impact on their neighborhood. Their leaders are vowing to picket, their attorney is threatening to sue, and several are warning they'll run you off the commission.

These people have a right to make their case, of course, but you've heard both sides and decided the developer was right. Why won't they accept your decision?

Welcome to government in the 1990s, where it's not enough to make good decisions. If you want your decisions to stand, you must find ways to make them acceptable — not only to those who win, but to those who lose.

Blame it on what sociologists call the decline of deference. In the past few decades, there has been an increasing unwillingness to accept any authority, including government, as final. The new attitude could be: "You might not beat city hall, but you can delay it almost forever."

A recent example is the Walt Disney Co.'s effort to build a history theme park in Prince William County, Virginia. State and local governments, regional planning boards, environmental agencies and a majority of county residents supported the park. But after months of protest by neighbors, Disney threw in the towel. Company executives figured building the park would cost them more in good will than they'd gain in profits.

Nearly every community has similar tales of projects delayed and defeated by small but determined groups armed with protests, public-relations campaigns and litigation. Developers have answered the delaying tactics with lawsuits of their own, called strategic lawsuits against public par-

ticipation, or SLAPP suits. But these counterattacks only deepen public cynicism, widen divisions within communities and stifle legitimate disagreements.

Is there a better way to get people to accept unwanted change, a way that actually brings people together?

A number of academic experts and others think there is. And a large part of the new approach depends on how you handle your job as planning commissioner. Here's their advice:

- *Let people have their say.* "Whenever people are confronted with change, they need the opportunity to react, to articulate their ambivalent feelings and work out their own sense of it," writes Peter Marris, who has studied slum clearance programs around the world. Your job as a planning commissioner is to listen intently and respectfully, even if their comments are illogical or unfair. "The main thing people want," adds Barbara Ann Blue, an organizational consultant in Tampa, Florida, "is to feel they've really been heard and understood."

- *Acknowledge their feelings are valid, even when you don't share them.* In times of anxiety, people expect sympathy. As a result, if you can say convincingly, "I understand how you feel," it'll go a long way toward easing their fears. Above all else, don't dismiss their concerns as unfounded. There's no surer way, experts say, of creating implacable enemies.

- *Allow people the opportunity to work out their own accommodations.* Marris compares two small towns devastated by natural disasters. One was an Appalachian town destroyed in a flood, the other a Welsh town washed away by a dam break. The Welsh town recovered; the Appalachian town sank into hopelessness. The reason: The townspeople in Wales took charge of their own relief effort — and later started a

national campaign to improve dam safety. Outsiders ran the Appalachian relief, and afterward the survivors could see nothing good that came from their misfortune.

In the variance dispute, look for ways to let neighbors work with the planning staff — or even the developer — in mitigating the development's impact. Allowing them to participate gives them a positive role to play and a sense of control over their own lives.

- *Preserve as much of the familiar as possible.* One of the first things people do, in moving to a new home, is hang a favorite picture on the wall. There's an important psychological principle here: the need for continuity. You might urge the developer to preserve part of the property — an old stone wall, for example, or prominent oak trees — as a way of softening the change.

- *Explain your decisions.* When you ask people to make a sacrifice, it helps if they see something good coming from it. Make the benefits as tangible as possible, in terms of jobs added, property values increased, shopping enhanced, traffic problems eased, or tax base enriched. Be sympathetic, but forward-looking. Look for compromises that will ease the transition. And then prepare yourself for the inevitable question: If this project is so wonderful, why don't you take it in your neighborhood? ♦

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