

# Commission and Staff: Expectations of Each Other

by Michael Chandler

In my last column, I looked at the relationship between the planning commission and the local governing body. In this column, I want to shift the focus to the important, but often overlooked, relationship between commission and staff.

Historically, the emergence of the planning commission as an important component of local government played a major role in the birth — and growth — of the planning profession. Accordingly, it seems fair to suggest that the commission and staff share a close relationship. As such, a challenge facing both commission and staff centers on identifying ways the relationship can be cooperative, as well as beneficial.

## THE ROLE OF EXPECTATIONS

Relationships involve expectations. What expectations will or should a planning commission have of the planning staff? Likewise, what expectations will or should the planning staff have of the commission? Without discussing the expectations each has of the other, misunderstandings are likely to result. This, in turn, can lead to publicly aired disagree-

*In my experience, here are ten of the most common expectations I've heard each "side" express:*

### COMMISSION EXPECTATIONS OF STAFF

- Be well organized and anticipate the type and kind of information the commission will need to perform its duties.
- Respond to requests for information in a timely and professional manner.
- Prepare accurate, well-documented, and well-written reports that, where appropriate, lay out options for the commission to consider.
- Leave personal or political bias out of reports.
- Provide exhibits, illustrations, and/or pictures to help commissioners visualize the location or layout of proposals.
- Help orient new commissioners, and provide educational opportunities for all members.
- Be accessible to all commissioners, whether in person, at meetings, or over the phone.
- Keep all commissioners equally informed; do not show favoritism.
- Make the commission decision work after it's made.
- Act in a fair, ethical, and consistent manner.

### STAFF EXPECTATIONS OF COMMISSION

- Prepare for meetings by reading all reports and by visiting (if legal in your community) each site on the agenda.
- Whenever possible, call staff with your questions before the meeting, so answers can be researched and shared during the meeting.
- Examine all the facts on a given issue and make the best decision possible.
- Do not ridicule or make light of the staff in public; instead, provide criticism in private.
- Do not assume the staff is wrong and citizen is right when there is a disagreement.
- Compliment the staff when and where appropriate.
- Trust and respect the staff.
- If the commission disagrees with a staff recommendation, explain your reasoning.
- Do not hold a grudge if you disagree with a staff recommendation.
- Act in a fair, ethical, and consistent manner.

ments or squabbling that reflects poorly on both staff and commissioners.

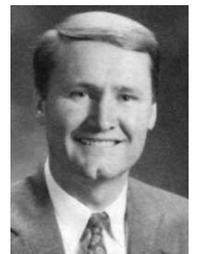
The simplest way to overcome the guessing game is for commissioners and staff to share their expectations with one another. A work session or retreat can focus on discussing expectations.

If the planning commission and its staff can communicate with one another, the occasion for commission-staff entanglements will be minimized. This is critical because the business of planning is too important to be sidetracked as a result of differences or difficulties involving the commission and staff.

Remember, the common goal of staff and commission is to serve the public good. This requires, above all, that all

actions be taken in a fair, ethical, and consistent manner. ♦

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*[Editor's Note: For more on the relationship between commission and staff, see Carolyn Braun's, "Planning from Different Perspectives," on page 8, and Perry Norton's, "The Role of the Professional Planner" on page 20].*



## On-Line Comment:

"I am a planning commissioner in a small town (population 1578). Mike's article hits on the very heart of where problems begin, lack of clear expectations. We have a permanent part-time zoning administrator. That is our only staff. Perhaps the most important expectation is CONSISTENCY! While the commissioners may or may not agree with the job the zoning administrator does, we all expect him to be consistent in administering our zoning ordinance. Lack of consistency leads to public perception of favoritism or incompetence."

— Dennis Riggan, Rock Hall, Maryland