

# You, Too, Can Speak So People Will Listen!

by Elaine Cogan

When a request comes in for someone to represent the planning department at a service club or neighborhood meeting, do you automatically hand that assignment over to staff? Is speaking before an audience one of the top items on your list of non-favorite subjects? If, so, you are not alone. In recent polls, 40 percent of Americans say they would rather have cancer or a heart attack than give a speech!

If you are fearful of giving a talk, think again. No one can be more effective than a citizen planning commissioner when presenting information about planning to a group of citizens. You, and your message, are less suspect than the “professional bureaucrats,” competent though they are, and you should welcome presentation opportunities. On the other hand, you may want to bring along staff to answer tough technical questions.

You can overcome stage fright and assuage your doubts by following these precepts.

- *Analyze the needs of your audience.* Too many speakers fail because they tell people what they want to tell them rather than what people want to hear. It is not pandering but common sense to tailor your presentation to the specific needs of each group of listeners. The members of the homebuilders association are interested in far different matters than the senior citizens, or parents of grade schoolers, or the League of Women Voters. Whatever your subject, it is important to couch the message in terms to which each particular audience will relate. Try to give specific examples whenever possible.

- *Speak in well understood words and phrases.* Even lay planning commissioners — if they have been around any length of time — can start talking in “plannerese.” That’s alright if your audi-

ence is staff or other commissioners. It is not alright when talking to the public. Avoid jargon whenever you can, but if you must use words such as infill, density, and setback, acronyms such as ISTEA, HUD and any others particular to your location, explain what they mean.

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- *Use humor appropriately.* Instead of telling jokes, it is far more effective to relate anecdotes that illustrate that even you or the planning department can take things somewhat lightly or make mistakes (correctable, of course). But if any humor is alien to your nature, play it straight. Never try to be someone you are not.

- *Understand the importance of non-verbal signals in reinforcing your message.* It is not enough to speak well. Pay attention to the clothes you wear (nothing too flashy or too formal or informal for your audience), posture (avoid hands behind your back or wild gestures), facial expressions (inappropriate scowls or smiles can be trouble), and any other nonverbal behavior that belies or seems to contradict your words.

- *Respect the questioner even when you doubt the question.* People ask dumb questions ... hostile ones ... tough ones ... all of which you should answer as directly as you can, but always respectfully. Those three little words, “I don’t know,”

followed up by “but I’ll find out for you,” should be high in your vocabulary. Sometimes you will have to “agree to disagree” with a certain point of view. Never lose your temper.

- *Do not promise more than you can deliver or commit the commission or staff to any additional projects or work without first consulting them.* One way to answer such a request is to say, “We have a full work program, but I will discuss your request with the rest of the commission.” Similarly, be careful not to indicate the “commission’s position” unless it is a matter you and your fellow commissioners have agreed upon.

- *One illustration is worth a thousand words — only if it is the right one.* Do not get trapped into showing a slide show or overheads developed by the department that you do not really understand or are uncomfortable using. Far better to give a presentation without illustrations than to use bad ones.

- *Remember that people are persuaded by people — not by information.* If the audience does not believe you as a credible carrier of information, they will not believe your information. The above hints should help you stay, or get out of trouble. You may even enjoy public speaking. Good luck! ♦

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