

# Making Planning Commissions More Effective

by Bruce W. McClendon

Voluntary citizen participation has long been a hallmark of local government in the United States. In most cities and counties, planning commissions are easily the most visible, influential, and controversial of all local citizen advisory groups.

This short commentary will offer suggestions — in the form of a checklist — for making commissions more effective.

Webster's defines "effective" as being "ready for service or action," or "producing or capable of producing a result." Commissions must possess certain organizational and operational characteristics if either individual commissioners or commissions are to be effective. The following is a brief list of what I've found to be the most important characteristics of effective, successful planning commissions. See how many your commission can place a check mark next to.

- The selection of commission members provides broad-based representation (a cross-section of community, background, talent, and abilities).
- The commissioner selection process places emphasis on community spirited membership that is representative, caring, and responsive to community needs.
- Orientation is provided for new members jointly by the staff and commission.
- The commission is well organized with clearly defined goals and objectives and established priorities that are reflected in an annual work program (essential if the commission is to function as more than a mere "zoning commission" responding to various applications).
- There is good overall communication characterized by openness at meetings, and positive relationships between commission members, staff, and the general public.
- There is effective realization and utilization of outside resources.
- There is receptiveness as evidenced by open-mindedness, flexibility, and willingness to change or to compromise.
- There is an understanding and acceptance of responsibilities as evidenced by a willingness to work, to face difficult issues, to stay informed, to listen and learn, and to give the time necessary for the job.
- There are policies, rules, and procedures for terminating inactive members.
- There is a commitment to striving for group consensus on issues through cooperation, teamwork, and the development of commission policies (this is particularly valued by elected officials).
- There is able leadership characterized by well-run meetings, good preparation, effective agendas, active committees, good attendance, promptness, respectful membership, and a pleasant atmosphere at meetings.
- Meeting times, dates, and places are selected for maximum convenience to the general public.
- Regular and on-going evaluation of the effectiveness of the commission and staff are provided.
- Members have a personal commitment based on concern, dedication, a feeling of usefulness, and an acceptance of self and others.
- There is productive membership achieved through perseverance, vision, enthusiasm, and a willingness to accept risk.
- There is an educated and knowledgeable commission that receives continuing education through workshops, conference trips, and published materials.

Any type of citizen advisory group in local government can be improved by emulating these organizational and operational characteristics of effective commissions. However, the critical role and responsibility of planning commissions demands an extraordinary commitment to maximum effectiveness and to excellence in public service. ♦

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