

¿Habra Usted Español?

by Elaine Cogan

Does anyone on your planning staff or board speak or understand Spanish? Russian? Laotian? How well do you communicate with the non-English speaking members of your community? How good is your pipeline to their concerns and viewpoints?

If you are not already doing so, it is time to extend your reach to the citizens of your community for whom English is not the first language. Especially in the case of non-English speaking minorities, this may require special effort. There are many reasons they may not be involved in planning matters, but it is folly to believe they do not care, especially if they live in areas affected by decisions such as rezoning. Let's examine the reasons they may not be involved and what the board and staff can do to improve the situation.

Written materials. If even some of the people affected by a proposed planning action are not conversant with English, the least the planning department can do is to translate notices for meetings and explanatory information into the language they do understand. However, I would like to pass on one hint I have learned from experience: make sure the translation is in the proper vernacular. I went to considerable effort recently to have a fact sheet translated into Spanish by a college professor, only to find out that her version was "textbook" perfect and not in the idiom with which this particular community

was familiar. You will have better results if you hire people from the community. They need not be professional translators.

Meeting schedules and formats. Do not expect people in minority communities to be comfortable at typical planning board hearings or meetings. If English is not their first language, they may not understand what is happening. Moreover, they probably cannot afford child care and do not have a habit of going "downtown" for government affairs. Hold planning board meetings out in their communities ... in schools, libraries, churches, or community meeting rooms. Provide free child care. Choose the time most convenient to your potential audience; this may include times not as convenient to you, such as weekends. Have translators available. In other words, look at the world through their eyes and make it as easy as possible for them to participate.

Leadership. For a good window into who the local leaders are, and people's activities and concerns, consult community newspapers. Make yourselves available to meet with leaders and ask them to be liaisons to their community; a good place to start is with the churches, schools, or social service agencies. But be forewarned, there are tensions and divisions in any community and it is wise not to be perceived as taking sides.

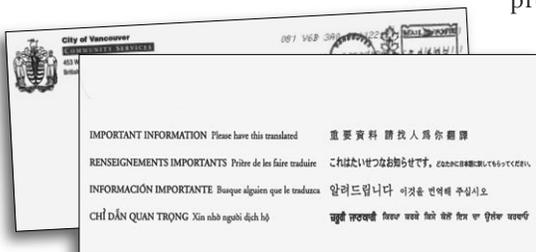
Expectations. Non-English speaking people may come from cultures less familiar with the give-and-take of our planning processes and they may expect more absolutes from their government. It is important to take this into consideration when the board or staff explains a planning process that often is more open and collaborative

than is their custom.

Behavioral differences. Respect the mores and customs of non-English speaking people, especially in the ways they use public spaces. One of the most successful park plans I have seen resulted after the planners observed how the affected Latino populace used their public spaces and then gave them choices. When asked, they said they preferred more benches to sit on and areas to stroll, suiting their friendly, neighborly customs. For this, they were willing to give up an additional soccer field and expensive playground equipment. Planners said they were glad they found out this information before they built the now popular, well-used park.

Lead by example. Examine the makeup of your planning board and staff. Are minority populations represented? Diversity that begins at these levels sends a powerful statement to all the communities you serve. In fact, if you will consider this increased awareness and action a challenge and an opportunity, you will enrich the perception and reality of planning for all people. ♦

Elaine Cogan is a partner in the Portland, Oregon, planning and communications firm of Cogan Owens Cogan. Elaine recently managed her firm's work on "Clackamas County Complete Communities," an ambitious effort to develop a sense of community and common purpose among citizens in all the rural, urban, and suburban areas of this large county in the Portland metropolitan area. This project is slated to receive a national award from the American Planning Association this Spring.



The City of Vancouver, B.C., mails out planning notices in envelopes which clearly urge recipients to have the enclosed information translated. According to Robert Rippon of the Community Services Department, "The languages printed on our envelopes are as follows: in the left column top to bottom: English, French, Spanish & Vietnamese; in the right-hand column (again, top to bottom): Chinese, Japanese, Korean & Punjabi. These languages represent the major ethnic components of Vancouver."

Note from the Editor: We received several quite interesting "online comments" when we circulated Elaine's article for review. While space does not allow their inclusion here, we have posted them on our PlannersWeb site at: <www.plannersweb.com/articles/epc45.html>.