

Variety on the Planning Commission is a Virtue

by Elaine Cogan

t your next planning commission meeting, look around at the other members. Do most or all generally resemble yourself in at least some of these qualities – gender, ethnicity, age, business or profession, income level? It may give you and the others a sense of comfort to fit a certain predictable pattern, but ask yourselves honestly if this is the best way to represent all the interests in your community. If you are planning for all, shouldn't you make every effort to represent all on the commission?

The best way to do this is to scrutinize the way you recruit new members. In many, especially smaller communities, this often is by word of mouth, tapping friends or people who are acknowledged leaders on other boards, the Chamber of Commerce, or similar business or philanthropic groups. They are likely to serve well, while looking and sounding like the people they replace. Earnestly seeking out others takes time and effort.

Some communities put small ads in the newspaper. If you advertise in this way, avoid dry, legal sounding announcements, and make the position enticing. Adding some humor can also be effective.

WANTED: Volunteers for exciting and dynamic position on our planning commission; long hours; no pay; but great rewards in knowing you are contributing to a better future for all of us. Please call or write...

If you agree on an ad, placement is most important. Local, general circulation newspapers may not be the best venue to attract the diversity you seek. Choose newspapers or radio stations that serve ethnic or under-represented communities, and write the ads in other languages if needed. Consider supplementing these ads with announcements on your community's web page or other

online sites.

It also is important to contact community organizations – including church groups – to tell them of vacancies on the planning board and encourage applications. Retirees often have the time and the background to be excellent commission members. Be sure to seek out leaders of neighborhood groups who have shown particular interest in planning issues.

EVEN IF YOU HAVE NO VACANCIES... AT THE MOMENT, ALWAYS BE LOOKING FOR POSSIBLE FUTURE CANDIDATES.

Do not shy away from casting the net far from where you usually troll for new members. Nor be overly concerned that some of the people you consider may seem to have strong opinions or proclivities. Put together a short job description, recognizing that everyone has certain biases or points of views, but that those chosen should be willing to subsume them for the well-being of the entire community.

Even if you have no vacancies on the commission at the moment, always be looking for possible future candidates. When you make presentations to organizations or speak with your local editors or publishers, put out the word that you are interested in compiling a list and speak to these people yourself.

Of course, even the most enlightened planning board can go only so far in recruiting new members. You may be consulted, but in most cases, the appointments are made by elected officials who look at the same pool of potential members as you have. By suggesting that the board should widen its scope, or

actually proposing members who do not have the same backgrounds as yourselves, you can influence the ultimate decisions.

The purpose of these suggestions is not to suggest you strive to achieve diversity for diversity's sake, but to break through the homogeneity and "old boys or girls" network that makes it difficult for the planning commission to do the job that it should be expected to perform. Moreover, citizen petitioners are likely to react favorably and be less hostile if the commission members reflect their interests and backgrounds.

Most of our communities are not like they used to be – neither should the planning board. ♦

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Online Comment

"In our city we also strive for geographic balance. At one point, the Planning & Zoning Commission was completely dominated by the eastern part of our community (because the western section had been recently annexed and the normal assimilation process had not yet taken place). Some very bad, insensitive decisions were made as a result – not intentionally, but as a result of not having even a single Commissioner familiar (on a day-to-day basis) with a certain area. Please consider geographic balance as a critical component."

– Laura Bryant, Creve Coeur, Missouri