

... In the Beginning

by Elaine Cogan

“I see we’re all here and we’re already five minutes late, so let’s get started. Ms. Planning Director, what’s the first item on the agenda?”

Does this sound familiar? Too many planning commission meetings begin in a similar fashion. The chair gavel everyone to order and launches right into the topic at hand. From there on, it is full speed ahead. While it may seem to be a direct and efficient way to carry out your business, it is a disservice to the planning board, staff, and especially the public. As tedious and repetitive as it may seem to some, it is important to establish a context for each meeting.

Keep in mind that many citizens may be attending a planning commission meeting for the first time and are not sure what to expect. At each meeting, you are doing the public’s business and should take the responsibility to set the scene appropriately. Commissioners and staff also benefit from taking a few minutes at the onset to make sure everything is in order.

While the preliminaries are primarily the responsibility of the chair, members

can do their part by encouraging the chair to set the right tone and participating when needed. These tips will help you start out on the right track.

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Mindful of the adage that whatever can go wrong will go wrong, test all the audio visual equipment just a few minutes before the meeting begins. The microphones should be able to be turned on and off with ease and at the right decibel level to be heard at the back of the room. Make sure computers are working and there is someone to help out if difficulties arise.

Always be aware of the public aspect of your work. Many communities show the proceedings on cable TV, live, and/or rebroadcast at a later time. Avoid side remarks to other commissioners and be careful not to be overly familiar with a

citizen you may know in another context.

Introduce all the commission members – either by the chair or themselves. You should have name plates, but be sure they are readable to people in the back. A short introduction – name/profession or business or affiliation – given either by the chair or individuals is a welcome gesture.

Review the role of the planning commission in the hierarchy of decision making in your community. It is helpful if you have a short summary, written in plain English, that can be handed out at each meeting. Paraphrase your key responsibilities and include a short glossary of the most used terms.

Review the agenda. State the purpose of the meeting, making it clear if you will be just hearing information or taking a vote on one or more matters.

Review the ground rules for public testimony and enforce them. Use a bell or clock to alert speakers when their time has expired.

Repeat all the above at each meeting. It may bore you, but will be gratefully received by your fellow citizens who are less savvy than you are about the workings of the planning board. Staff and commission can then get down to work with some assurance the stage has been set for an orderly and respectful process. ♦

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Since 1991, Ms. Cogan’s “The Effective Planning Commissioner” column in the PCJ has helped citizen planners across the country find ways of serving their communities most effectively.

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