

# The Endemic Problem of Information Overload

by Elaine Cogan

What are the contents of the typical information packet you receive for a planning commission meeting? You will likely find the agenda, minutes of the last meeting, and backup material about each item for discussion. The packet also may be thick and wordy, densely packed with planning and legal jargon and perhaps some hard-to-read maps or sketches. If you are referred to a website for further clarification, is this information presented in a way that aids understanding or does it confound the issues yet more?

Fast forward to the meeting itself. How does staff present their reports? Do they go into minute detail, often reading from the material they have sent you? What do they tell the commission that is relevant to the issue at hand and what merely anecdotal that may not be pertinent to the decisions you have to make? Are slides and charts clear and concise? Do you have any help, such as a glossary, in navigating a sometimes arcane planning vocabulary? Do you as a planning commissioner have all the tools you need to make informed decisions or do you too often lack a clear and consistent roadmap?

If you sometimes feel overwhelmed by information or how it is presented, put yourself in the shoes of the hapless citizen applicant who often must wade through pages of a legalistic questionnaire simply to ask for permission to extend his driveway. A one page summary and an explanation of common planning terms and processes can do much to alleviate distress. This also can be used as a refresher sheet for the commissioners.

This is the age of information overload and it affects us all as we go about doing the people's business. With care and diligence, changes can be made that help all parties be more effective and efficient.

To begin, ask yourselves and staff what you need to know, and when and how you need to know it. It will help matters considerably if each action item on your agenda is accompanied by a short summary that outlines all the pertinent issues under consideration and the effects of various decisions that can be made. For reference, the relevant technical information can be attached. At the meeting or hearing, staff may follow up by creating and referring to a few slides that show all the salient points and decisions needed.

THE GOAL SHOULD BE TO CONTROL INFORMATION RATHER THAN BE CONTROLLED BY IT.

This approach has several positive benefits. It helps commission members cut through the plannerese to the essence of matters and also disciplines planning staff to think and act more succinctly. Its added value is that citizen observers are apprised of all the issues under deliberation.

Another way to use information wisely, without overloading the senses, is to organize get-togethers of the commission an hour or so before the regularly scheduled meeting or hearing. These meetings are for information only and no decisions are made. Some commissions combine this with a light meal, if that is appropriate. They should be more informal times for staff to give you behind-the-scenes, but not privileged,

information and for commission members to ask clarifying questions. Before holding even an informal meeting, check with legal counsel to be sure it conforms to your local or state open meetings provisions. Even if public notice and access are required, you can still benefit from such a session.

It is well known that some people learn better from reading the written word and others from hearing oral presentations. Presentations to the planning board should take all this into account. By making sure the information, no matter the form, is understandable and as free from jargon as possible, all types of learners can be accommodated. The goal should be to control information rather than be controlled by it. ♦

Elaine Cogan, principal in the Portland, Oregon, planning and communications firm of Cogan Owens Cogan, LLC, is a consultant to many communities undertaking strategic planning or visioning processes. Her "Effective Planning Commissioner" column regularly appears in the *Planning Commissioners Journal*.



**Now that You're on Board:**  
*How to Survive ... and Thrive ... as a Planning Commissioner.*

Through 25 practical tips, Elaine Cogan provides insights on the valuable role planning board members play, and how they can use their skills most effectively. For more details & to order: [plannersweb.com/onboard.html](http://plannersweb.com/onboard.html)

# Visit our PlannersWeb site for Information on All Our Publications & Back Articles

PLANNING COMMISSIONERS JOURNAL

## PlannersWeb

City & Regional Planning Resources [www.plannersweb.com](http://www.plannersweb.com)



JUST PUBLISHED: OUR FALL ISSUE



The Fall PCJ includes articles on the use of pattern books; GIS & planning -- and much more. [Take a look at the full table of contents.](#)

### Our November Special Offer: Planning Across America

Note from Planning Comm'rs Journal Editor Wayne Senville:

America's cities and towns face a variety of planning challenges. The following back issues from the Planning Commissioners Journal report on many of these key issues. You'll get fascinating historical perspectives from noted planning historian [Laurence C. Gerckens](#) (in the Promise of America and the 20th Century City) -- in the other four back issues you'll hear how a variety of communities large & small are dealing with current land use and zoning issues. I think there's much to learn both by looking back, and by hearing how other communities are addressing some of the same issues you're likely facing.

Save over 50% on the following back issues -- just \$6.50 each. Or order all 6 for just \$30. This special offer good through Sunday, Nov. 30th. Remember, new specials posted here the first Monday of every month.

Click on cover images to view contents -- but you need to return to this page to order from the checklist (below) to receive the half-price savings. This special pricing is for print copies delivered by mail, not downloads.

QUICK ACCESS

- About the PCJ
- PCJ Subscriptions:
  - [new subscriptions](#)
  - [renewals](#)
- New!** [Our Fall Issue](#)
- New!** [Monthly Special](#)
- PCJ Articles:
  - [use topical directory](#)
  - [search by keyword](#)
- Other PCJ Publications:
  - [ten reprint collections](#)
  - [New Comm'rs Guide](#)
  - [Now You're Onboard](#)
- [PCJ Back Issues](#)
- [Online Planning ABCs](#)
- [The Planning Universe](#)
- [Public Buildings:](#)



PlannersWeb Store

http://plannersweb.com/store/orders.html

- Elaine Cogan's **Now that You're on Board: How to Survive & Thrive as a Planning Comm'r**
- Welcome to the **Commission!** - Guide for New Members
- "Taking a Closer Look" Reprint Sets:
  - New:
    - Food - Farmland & Open Space
    - Transportation: -- Getting Started
    - Transportation: -- New Directions
    - Smart Growth
    - Housing
  - Recently Revised:
    - Basic Planning Tools
    - Downtowns & Town Centers
    - Ethics & the Planning Commission
    - Planning Law Primer
    - Design & Aesthetics
- Planning Comm'rs Journal [Back Issues](#)
- [Subscribe](#) to the Planning Comm'rs Journal
- [Individual Articles](#) from the Planning



### Download & Print Out our Publications Order Form or Order Online from this Page

View our [Current Special Offers](#) -- with Big Savings

Please use the links on the left side of the page for details on our publications & to order. Scroll down the page for links to all our publications. If there are no links visible, [click here](#).

25% Planning Commissioners Journal subscriber discount on all publications (except some special offers & subscriptions to the Journal itself). If you're ordering online, [click here to activate your discount](#). For information on [subscribing](#) to the PCJ.

## www.plannersweb.com