

Meaningful Dialogue With the Public

by Elaine Cogan

To keep and maintain the trust of the public, it is imperative that your planning commission understands – and practices – the fine art of inviting their comments and questions and responding in a cordial and respectful manner.

This begins with the environment, the scene you set when the public comes to visit. If you conduct business while sitting on the same level as the audience, you send a nonverbal signal there is no “we” and “they” and you are all in this together. If, however, the protocols in your community dictate that you are on a dais above the people, and you cannot change that arrangement, it is more difficult to create an atmosphere that invites productive public dialogue.

The word “dialogue” is chosen carefully. You should want to engage in a conversation with the public, not a monologue where either side – the planning commissioners or the public – monopolizes. One caveat: in some states, public hearings are formal procedures, requiring sworn testimony and other legal processes that may preclude a meaningful conversation between commissioners and the public. While some of the advice in this column is also pertinent to these type of hearings (e.g., being clear about the ground rules, listening with respect), the primary focus is on those less formal situations where you invite people to give their opinions on various matters on your agenda, and a two-way dialogue is appropriate.

Although many of the points made below are addressed primarily to the chair and how that person handles the meeting, the rest of the commission has an active role to play, also. All members should interact freely with the public, although the chair is expected to be the primary person in control.

It is most important to establish ground rules and enforce them. Ask people

who wish to speak to sign in ahead of time and refer to that list throughout the meeting. You can then call on each one by name. If you accompany your words by a nod or a smile, you show a welcoming acceptance.

BE CAREFUL NOT TO DIGRESS INTO IRRELEVANCIES THAT DO NOT ADVANCE THE DISCUSSION.

This orderly process allows you to pace the meeting. If many people are signed up to speak on the same issue, divide the allotted time for comments equally and sound a buzzer or a bell when the time is up. A 20-30 second warning is usually appreciated. Do not hesitate to interrupt a loquacious lecturer with a polite but firm, “Thank you, now it is time to hear from (with the name of the next person)...”

Encourage people not to reiterate what someone else has said, but be patient with repeaters. They may have been concentrating on their own presentation and not listened to those before them. It helps to move matters along by keeping brief notes of the salient points each person presents. At an opportune time, sum up what you have heard and request those following to confine their remarks to something new.

If you are asked a question that is somewhat long or ambiguous, paraphrase it. “As I understand it, Ms. Carlson, you want to know...” If Ms. Carlson nods, you can proceed. If she shakes her head, invite her to rephrase her question.

Some people just have a statement to make. Hear them out in the allotted time and move on. Do not invite their further loquaciousness by asking if they have a specific question.

Answer questions succinctly and to the point. Be careful not to digress into irrelevancies that do not advance the discussion. Avoid plannerese and jargon, always keeping in mind you are talking with laypeople.

Show by your body language that you are listening. Lean forward, with hands discretely on the table or in your lap. Never roll your eyes, shake your head, or tap a pencil or pen – all sure signals you are impatient or distracted.

Do not fall for “red herrings” or baited questions. If necessary, repeat what you or other commissioners have said or explain your answer in more detail.

Avoid a “one on one” with any questioner, broadening your answers so they are general and relate to the concerns of most or all the people in the audience.

Always be polite. You may have to agree to disagree, but insults and innuendo are never appropriate.

Do not be afraid to say you do not know, but add, “We will get the information for you.” Ask the questioner to see you or the staff afterwards. Never bore everyone else by asking a person’s name, phone number, etc., at the time.

Sum up before you go on to the next agenda item. “Thank you for talking with us today. We have taken down all your comments and questions and will consider them carefully.”

By engaging in a true dialogue with the public, you may learn some useful information and actually enjoy the give-and-take. ♦

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