

# First on the Agenda is the Agenda!

by Elaine Cogan

Who sets the agenda for your planning board meetings? How are decisions made about the order, public comment, and other important matters? Do you allot specific times or just go with the flow? In other words, does your agenda work for you as well as it should?

If your planning board uses its agenda as a tool to efficient and productive meetings, these questions may seem elementary and even foolish. But if you are one of many whose agenda is either inadequate or even an impediment to effective meetings, it may be wise to consider how it can be improved.

The agenda is the template for your meetings. It should be developed thoughtfully so that the planning board has adequate time for matters that require attention and/or decisions and less time for “housekeeping” or more routine subjects. It should delineate plainly when public comment is invited and the actions expected of each item (review only; action; referral, etc.).

Many commissions leave the agenda writing to staff and may see it for the first time when they come to the meeting. This does not serve you or the public well. The best approach is for the chair, or a committee of your board, to review the agenda before it is final and for commissioners to receive it and any backup materials several days in advance.

Upcoming meeting agendas should also be posted in public places, such as public libraries and town or city halls. A growing number of communities also are posting agendas on their Web sites.

Other helpful procedures:

- Allow ample and early time for issues which most concern the public. Too often, planners still put them last or next to last on the agenda even though they are well aware of one or more matters certain to attract a big crowd. It is no

wonder that people get restless and cranky if they have to sit through several hours of deliberations that do not concern them. Put the contentious or controversial issues on the agenda early, and give them the time they deserve. Do not be offended if most of the crowd leaves as soon as you turn to other matters.

- Consider setting aside a general comment period where people can talk to you about any planning items that concern them. Fifteen minutes at the beginning of the agenda usually is adequate and can serve as a “safety valve” for testing the pulse of the community.

- Place together routine items that require little or no discussion on the agenda and consider them in a group. Some bodies call this the “consent agenda” and require one motion and one vote to approve them all. But be careful that they are, indeed, routine items and not anything controversial you can be accused of “sneaking through.”

- Print the allotted time for each item on the agenda...7-7:05, Roll Call; 7:05-15, Correspondence; 7:15-7:45, Major item # 1, Public Comment, etc. ... and follow the schedule as much as you can.

- Do everything possible to make the public comfortable. Print sufficient agendas for all to have one, with the aforementioned time allotments. Also, make sure there are sufficient copies of any graphics or explanatory material.

- At the start of the meeting, ask people who wish to speak on specific agenda items to sign up. This allows the chair to control the agenda and perhaps ask the board to extend the time if it is obvious the stated comment period is not sufficient for all the people who wish to be heard.

- Make sure the agenda is written in words and phrases easily understood by the public. How long did it take you, as a layperson, before you finally understood

planning jargon? Put yourself in the shoes of the citizen who is attending her first meeting. You probably need to use legal terminology when you are actually voting, but that should not preclude an explanation on the agenda that is in plain English.

- Are you expecting a turnout of non-English speaking people? Translate the agenda into one or more other languages beforehand and engage interpreters to be available at the meeting.

- Provide a simple explanation of the board's procedures on each agenda or on a separate handout. What is the purpose of a first reading? Second? Do you require simple majorities or unanimous votes? What general rules of procedure do you follow?

- Keep to your schedule, unless there are extenuating circumstances. The public and the board will be appreciative.

All planning boards and commissions have some form of agenda. By treating it seriously, you will find it is an important tool toward orderly and productive meetings. ♦

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*Editor's Note:* We received a number of thoughtful replies from our “online reviewers” concerning Elaine's article. Because we do not have the space to include this feedback here, we are posting it on our PlannersWeb site at: [www.plannersweb.com/agendas.html](http://www.plannersweb.com/agendas.html) – along with other information related to meeting agendas.