

Learning to Enjoy Your Service on the Commission

by Elaine Cogan

One would be hard pressed to find another overworked, underappreciated position in any community equal to being a planning commissioner. There usually is no financial remuneration, and the meetings often are tedious, technical, and sometimes contentious. Your best friends may disagree with a decision you make. Why, then, even bother? Surely, there are other uses you can find for your time.

One reason that seems to give commissioners a boost is that little goes on in the community that is not affected somewhat by planning. You have the opportunity to influence and lead the way to change that will be felt for years to come. Look upon these positive attributes as your challenge to execute the obligations of your office so that the experience is, indeed, one you savor.

Some principles to consider:

Do not take it personally. It would be gratifying if you and the other commissioners could deal only with the big picture, concepts, and ideas. Often, however, it is the nuts and bolts of how individuals can use their property that concern the commission, and this can become very personal.

When landowners get frustrated or angry, they may express themselves in ways that are not pleasant. You will survive and keep your sanity if you realize it is the system they rail against and the planning board and staff are convenient targets. Never forget, however, that even words expressed in anger can contain kernels of truth worth being considered.

Respect your staff. They are human. They err. Sometimes their mistakes are embarrassing or should be overturned. You are entitled, or even expected to, question your staff carefully, but do it privately. If you have to overturn their recommendation, vote on the facts as you see them, not hearsay or opinion. Never

make them scapegoats in a public setting. This diminishes you in the eyes of the public and also undermines the confidence people will have in your staff in the future.

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Avoid being seduced by plannerese. The longer you are on the planning commission, the more technical information you will come to understand. However, you are not, nor should you be, a professional planner. Put yourself in the shoes of the citizens. In documents that are sent to the public, insist that the staff translate planning jargon into plain English. Add a summary page to your meeting agenda or include a glossary of most commonly used terms.

Maintain collegial relations with your other commissioners. You may have been appointed because of the particular segment of the community or interest you represent and not have known your fellow commissioners before this. Moreover, you may have little in common, socially or professionally. Still, you all have the same title. It is your zeal to work for the good of the community that binds you, although you may define it in different ways. Show respect for each others' opinions even if you differ, in the meeting room and wherever you may be together.

Taking time for a convivial cup of coffee or tea before or after a meeting can help cement relationships. But check first with your staff or the city attorney to make sure this does not violate open

meeting laws or run counter to community norms.

Always be prepared. Staff spend many hours working on the agenda and supporting documents. Read them over carefully before the meeting and call them for clarification if there is something you do not understand. Listen attentively to their presentations and those of the public, asking questions that show you have done your homework.

Understand the political landscape. No one need tell you that planning is far from an ivory tower exercise. The commission is appointed by a political body and does its work within a political environment.

That said, it is important that your decisions be the best you can make for the entire community. You need to be very careful not to give even a hint of favoritism. This means, for example, not meeting separately with a buddy of the mayor's or huddling in a corner at a social event with anyone who has a stake in a development or other major decision your commission is being asked to make.

Your well reasoned decisions may be overturned by the elected officials, but that is their prerogative for which they have to answer to the public.

In these and other ways, you can enjoy the important role you play in your community. ♦

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