



April, 1996
Volume 2, Issue 3

Nine Guidelines for Planning Commissioners

by Jerome Kaufman

I served for four years as a member of the Madison, Wisconsin Planning Commission in the early 1980's. During that time I never seemed to find enough time to think about what it takes to do a good job in the challenging, time-consuming, sometimes frustrating but always important role of a planning commissioner. Long since retired as a planning commissioner, I sat down recently and reflected on my experience. Nine points struck me as useful to consider. Some of the many Wisconsin citizens who now serve as planning commissioners might find some of my reflective thoughts of interest as they trek off to their bi-monthly or monthly planning commission meetings in the town, village, city or county governmental buildings.

For starters, be scrupulously honest. Avoid any conflict of interest, even the appearance of impropriety. The American Planning Association's "Statement of Ethical Principles for Planning" code has several guidelines that are helpful for planning commissioners to consider if a potential conflict of interest is brewing: make that interest public, abstain from voting on the matter, don't participate in any deliberations on the matter, and leave any chamber in which such deliberations are to take place. Integrity should be a hallmark of a planning commissioner's "modus operandi".

Second, be an active listener. Despite the tendency to let your mind wander off to things unrelated to the issues at hand at one of those occasional interminably long planning commission meetings, try your darndest to hear what everyone is saying. Even if you disagree or are bored out of your wits by some of the statements expressed at a public hearing, courtesy, fairness, and common civility warrant no less from a commissioner than to be an attentive listener.

Third, try to facilitate consensus. Understand that although issues are complex and controversial, with strong and forceful views often expressed on different sides, seek opportunities to get the disputants to reach a consensus. On the whole, good planning is better served by reaching consensus solutions than by letting contentious differences remain unresolved.

Fourth, when you think you're right, don't be afraid to take a stand that might be unpopular. Conflict is an inherent part of planning. Recognize that in some instances conflicts can't be resolved so that everyone wins. So, despite strong opposition, stand up and take a position you think is right. In the long run, you'll gain respect from others as long as you don't become a nay-sayer on almost every issue.

Fifth, make your decision on the basis of the "best" intelligence you can muster. Above all, watch out for winging it with incomplete information. If you think the planning staff (if there is one) is holding back, don't be timid about asking them to give you more and better information to arrive at your judgment. It's part of their job to provide you with as full a range of information, data and facts about the potential impacts of prospective actions, especially on the tougher issues.

Sixth, take the opportunity to educate others. Because planning commissioners become immersed, sometimes swamped, in a lot of community issues, they get to be much more informed by osmosis than most people do about them. Don't hoard that knowledge. Communicate it to others whenever you get a chance. This can help raise the quality of thinking and discourse about local planning and development issues. The cause of good decision-making is better served by you being a conduit of information and insights for others.

Seventh, don't get stuck in a rut. Be aware that every problem that comes before you need not be solved in the same way. Avoid the pitfall of thinking you can use only a hammer as a tool. Because if you do, then every problem you consider will too often resemble a nail.

Eighth, sort out the issues that come before you and use your scarce time wisely. Recognize that there are basically four types of issues: routine and non-controversial; routine and controversial; complex and controversial; and complex and non-

controversial. Often commissioners spend the most time on the controversial issues, be they routine or complex. But the ones that often deserve more attention are the complex and non-controversial issues, those that often slide by without much deliberation because they don't generate much "heat". Yet, in the long run, these may be the most important ones to probe more deeply into because of their future impacts.

Above all, as planning commissioners, view yourselves as "custodians" for the community-wide, long range point of view. In other words, you should have a strong concern about the effects that proposed policies and actions will have "down the road," particularly about how these will affect the whole community, not just parts of it. And in doing so, you should also consider how your decisions might affect other communities and even future generations. Practically speaking, this means that planning commissioners should give their best unadulterated advice. Although elected officials ultimately decide, don't fall into the trap of "softening your advice" by anticipating the reactions of the politicians. Corny as it may sound, planning commissioners should be the "conscience" of the community for good planning. That's what you've been "hired" to do in your unpaid jobs as public servants.

Jerome Kaufman is a Professor, and Extension Specialist at the UW-Madison Department of Urban and Regional Planning.