

## HOW A PLANNING COMMISSION OPERATES

### Planning Commission Roles

Generally, the planning commission has three basic roles:

- Role #1. *Advisory***
- Role #2. *Regulatory***
- Role #3. *Procedural***

#### *Advisory Role*

The commission is the “keeper of the plan.” The “plan” refers to the local comprehensive plan and implementation ordinances. The commission is responsible for assisting with the preparation, review, and approval of the comprehensive plan and ordinances. They work with the public, the governing body, and staff. They advise the governing body on planning matters related to the development and implementation of the comprehensive plan. They make recommendations on plan adoption, plan amendments, and rezones. They are a listener, counselor, gatherer of facts and information, and a facilitator.

#### *Regulatory Role*

The commission administers the local land use regulations such as the zoning and subdivision ordinances.

#### *Procedural Role*

The commission is charged with running a fair meeting, making fair decisions, and conducting itself properly.

### Key Planning Commission Responsibilities

#### *Know your community and its geography and character*

Your knowledge as a resident of the city or borough is invaluable to the commission. If you are not as familiar with your community as you might be, do yourself and the commission a favor: after reading this handbook, go out and take a tour of your community.

Look at the landscape and take note of the lot sizes, the ages, and the architecture of the homes. Note where the major and minor transportation routes are and where major utility rights-of-way are located. Where are the public buildings, parks, and schools located? Where are the major business areas and traffic flows? Where are the major industries?

Learn about the community’s natural features: its streams, waterbodies, drainage channels, wetlands, steep slopes, avalanche and mass wasting exposures, different soils types, prevailing and seasonal winds, snow drift patterns, and other matters that would affect development decisions. Discover what is happening with the natural environment. Are there areas prone to



### How a Planning

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“Effective staff/commission relations are vital to the overall success of planning in your community, whether your planning agency has one, ten, or one hundred employees. Good will and an understanding of the pitfalls that impede sound relationships can help you solve any problems that may arise.”

- Planning Commissioners  
Journal, No. 3, March/April  
1992, Elaine Cogan

flooding or erosion? Is a wetland or wildlife habitat being threatened? Are there old landfills leaching pollutants into the waterbodies?

Take note of what is located where and what is occurring. Is the community growing? Are businesses moving or finding it difficult to survive? Is traffic becoming more of a problem? If so, where and why? Is the average age of the population increasing or decreasing?

Get a firm grasp on your community and on the factors affecting its prosperity, quality of life, and local economy. In many rural communities, land use planning that supports a subsistence way of life is as important as planning decisions that promote a cash-based economy.

Use the State of Alaska DCED web page and community profiles for current and well-presented information about your community.

### *Know your local regulations and all required procedures*

Preparation is key to being an effective planning commissioner and it starts with knowledge. Commission members must have knowledge of the comprehensive plan and municipal land use codes (e.g. zoning and subdivision) at a minimum. Review the comprehensive plan and look for the general intent and for the way in which the various provisions interrelate. Ask yourself why certain uses are grouped

with certain others. Look for patterns. Review the zoning and subdivision codes – their intent, definitions, applicability, and review procedures. Become familiar with the other plans and codes used in your community, such as the coastal management plan, capital improvement plans, housing plans, State DOT/PF highway plans, the statewide transportation improvement plan, recreation and trails plans, flood mitigation plans, and where applicable, building and safety codes.

### *Know your partners*

There are many partners in the planning process. They include the governing body (borough or municipal assembly or city council), planning commission, board of adjustment, state legislature, courts, and planning staff. Look for opportunities to meet your governing body members, planning director, and staff. Find out what their concerns are. Ask about the history of planning issues. Learn what has been tried, what has worked and has not worked, and why. Get to know the “movers and shakers” and their positions. Your knowledge regarding community concerns will assist you when you are faced with difficult decisions.

### *Know the meeting agenda*

In addition, an effective commissioner comes prepared for the meeting. This means that, in advance of the meeting, you review the commission agenda, set aside time for thinking about the topics, review

the facts, and if necessary, meet with the planning director to discuss the meeting and any questions you might have about the agenda.

## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STAFF, GOVERNING BODY, AND THE PLANNING COMMISSION

### Staff and Commission Relationship

The planning staff plays a vital role in the planning process and the effectiveness of the planning commission. Staff carry out the tasks associated with administering the land use regulations. They also perform necessary research, prepare plans and reports, and distribute and explain the results of their work.

Professional planning staff have been trained to perform research; write reports; make public presentations and meet with the public; interpret plans, municipal ordinances, and other laws and carry out the routine tasks of their job. They do this using their training in geography, landscape design, urban and rural planning, economics, law, statistics, knowledge of the community, and other education and experience. In some communities the staff will have dual roles as the engineer, the manager/administrator, or the clerk.

Staff and its work may have the following effect on the planning commission and can be described using the following examples: The commission should consider how well the planning program is providing needed services in the community. Many communities do not have a full-time or even part-time planner on staff. Typically, another local government employee may serve as the planner. If services are not being adequately provided, the commission needs to support the hiring of either a full-time or part-time planner. This can be achieved through the municipal budgeting process (see the section on the Municipal Budget in Chapter Six).

### Elected Body and Commission Relationship

As a planning commission, are too many of your recommendations or decisions are overturned by the elected officials? Or, as an elected official, do you wonder what direction the planning commission will take next? The following ideas may improve working relationships between the planning commission and elected officials.



### Planning Staff:

- ✓ Administers the land use regulations
- ✓ Prepares staff reports and notices for meetings
- ✓ Researches planning, land use, and development issues
- ✓ Advises and assists the planning commission
- ✓ Educates and assists the public
- ✓ Knows and interprets laws and ordinances
- ✓ Conducts community and capital project planning
- ✓ Negotiates, facilitates, and coordinate between agencies, developers, and the public
- ✓ Enforces municipal code and conditions of approval stipulated by the commission
- ✓ Provides continuity – policy, documents, and people



**Top ten ways the planning commission can improve its relationship with the elected body:**

1. Understand the responsibilities and authority of the planning commission and elected body.
2. Make sound decisions with adequate findings to insure that the reasons for your actions are clear to the elected officials.
3. Attend the governing body’s meeting when an appeal of one of your decisions is being considered.
4. Ask for clarification of the governing body’s policies or actions that are unclear.
5. Include in planning commission minutes any questions or points of view that are not obvious in your decisions and findings.
6. Request an annual joint work session to discuss priorities, communications, etc.
7. Recognize the elected officials’ responsibilities to voters. Be acquainted with the political platforms of the members of the governing body.
8. Enlist the help of the media. Use “op-ed” or opinion pieces to clarify commission opinions.
9. Do not rely solely on staff to convey your message – either to the public or to appropriate elected officials.
10. Do an annual self-evaluation and follow through with any needed changes in how the commission does business.

Staff Role	Effect on the Planning Commission (PC)
Explains land use plan, zoning and subdivision requirements at the “counter.”	Staff’s explanation and attitude affect the tone and content of testimony at the PC meeting.
Accepts or rejects applications.	Staff’s assurance that applications are complete saves time and confusion at the PC meetings.
Prepares staff reports.	Staff’s identification of issues, data, and criteria assists the PC with decisions and citizens with testimony.
Prepares public notices.	Staff’s notice minimizes legal challenges to PC decisions and reduces “no one notified me” claims at public hearings.
Stays current on regulations, court cases, rulings, etc.	Staff’s knowledge prevents PC errors from lack of current information.

## Commission vs. Staff

### *Commission Expectations of Staff*

- ❑ Be well organized and anticipate the type of information the commission will need.
- ❑ Respond to request for information in a timely and professional manner.
- ❑ Prepare accurate, well-researched, documented, and well-written staff reports including basis for recommendations (legal findings of fact).
- ❑ Provide exhibits, illustrations, and/or pictures to help commissioners and the public visualize the proposal.
- ❑ Help orient new commissioners.
- ❑ Be accessible to all commissioners.
- ❑ Keep all commissioners equally informed.
- ❑ Implement the commission's decision.
- ❑ Act in a fair, ethical, and consistent manner.
- ❑ Make professional verbal presentations at commission meetings.

### *Staff Expectations of the Commission*

- ❑ Prepare for meetings by reading all reports.
- ❑ Call staff with your questions before the meeting.
- ❑ Examine all the facts on a given issue and make the best decision possible.
- ❑ State your reasons for your decision (legal findings of fact).
- ❑ Do not ridicule or make light of the staff in public.
- ❑ Do not assume the staff is wrong and the citizen is right.
- ❑ Compliment the staff when and where appropriate.
- ❑ Trust and respect staff.
- ❑ Remember that the planners' first responsibility is to the city or borough administration.
- ❑ Explain your reasoning if the commission disagrees with staff recommendation.
- ❑ Act in a fair, ethical, and consistent manner.

The above tips were taken from the *Planning Commissioners Journal*, November 24, 1996.

## PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND WORKING WITH CITIZENS

Public participation takes a great deal of planning, hard work, and resources. The

planning commission is one of many forums where the public has a chance to learn about the community, find out about proposed projects, and participate in the decision-making process.

Major reasons to incorporate meaningful



“Many new commissioners feel they have been appointed to the commission to represent a political view or to advocate an agenda. Decisions that take place on the planning commission level are always best made when the commission works towards a common goal of trying to shape the best possible solution for all those involved. All commissioners will need to rely on the other commissioners to help handle dicey decisions and there is no place for adversarial positions on a planning commission.”

- Dwayne Adams,  
MOA Planning Commissioner



## Attributes of an Effective Planning Commissioner

- ✓ Patient
- ✓ Self-confident
- ✓ Willing
- ✓ Good listener
- ✓ Enthusiastic
- ✓ Objective
- ✓ Courageous
- ✓ Sense of humor
- ✓ Public spirited

“Listen or your tongue will make you deaf.”

- Native American Proverb

and broad-based public participation as part of the local planning program include:

- Improving the general trust in government
- Tapping local knowledge and talents
- Creating a sense of ownership in the plan and governing regulations
- Creating a constituency for planning
- Ensuring the plan remains intact over time
- Increasing the quality of the plan
- Improving enforcement of land use laws
- Streamlining the development and planning process

Involving the public gives the commission an opportunity to educate, build support, and encourage ownership of a project.

## Public Involvement Techniques

There are a number of public involvement techniques a community can use that have proved successful. These can work well to keep the community informed about plans and actions. Techniques include:

- Visioning and focus groups
- Public meetings
- Open houses (information sharing/gathering)
- Facilitated discussions (issue identification, scoping, present alternatives)
- Joint meetings with community councils, city councils or assembly, and local corporations

- Newsletters
- Media – interviews, talk shows, public service announcements
- Surveys

## Elements of a Successful Public Meeting or Hearing

Consider the following checklist when planning the next public meeting or hearing:

### *Purpose*

There should be a good reason to meet. The purpose may be to gather information (and listen and learn) about a project. The purpose may be to perform an official function, make a decision (facilitate).

### *Notice*

People need to know they should attend, why they should, and when and where the hearing or meeting will be held.

### *Preparation*

For a successful meeting, an agenda must be prepared and published, people need to be notified, arrangements must be made for a proper meeting place and time, and reports and visual aids prepared.

### *Agenda*

Public meetings and hearings need clear and fair rules about the procedure to be followed. An agenda available for public review prior to the meeting is essential. By sticking to the agenda, the commission can run an efficient hearing.

### *Participants*

Make sure the necessary people are invited to attend the meeting.

### *Place*

The site for the meeting needs to be convenient for the participants and of a type and size appropriate for the meeting.

### *Results*

Time should be taken at the conclusion of the meeting to reflect on the meeting and what was accomplished.

### *The Record*

A record of the meeting must be kept. A list of the time, the place, participants, and results may be adequate for an informal meeting. For public hearings, minutes must be taken and filed with the local government. In some communities, the meetings are tape-recorded and the tapes filed for future reference.



