



**Michigan Association of Planning
A Chapter of the American Planning Association**

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The Planning and Zoning Officials Academy provides local elected and appointed officials with both basic and advanced topics addressing issues that are unique to the role as a local government representative. To suggest a topic, please contact Kelly McIntyre at (734)913-2000.

On Being an Effective Planning Commissioner

Planning commissions have two major obligations. Under Michigan law, the commission's primary responsibility is to develop and adopt a comprehensive master plan. The second, and perhaps the more time consuming responsibility, is to provide leadership to the local legislative body and local administrators in using or implementing the master plan and related plans.

The work of the planning commission, then, follows a logical process—studying various problems and aspects of the community, developing a master plan and related plans, recommending rules to regulate development activities, and then evaluating these proposals against the master plan. If the planning commission builds good relations with the legislative body and community and recommends carefully considered development policies and rules, the efforts will be rewarded as the community matures into a place functioning efficiently and pleasing aesthetically.

Desirable Qualities

What qualities make for an effective planning commission? There is no perfect formula, of course, but below are four important elements.

Team Player

Given the disjointed flow of cases, how do new planning commissioners make decisions? In part, they take cues from more experienced ones or even seek their

advice. Or, if a planning commission has worked together for a long time, individual commissioners may get to know each other so well that they easily form a consensus on the issues they face.

Ordinarily this is a desirable relationship to have. But it may also mask a threat, the danger of “groupthink.” This phenomenon occurs when members of a group do not ask the critical questions or, together, push them aside. Thus, individual commissioners need to develop a sense of when to be a team member by following the lead of others or by asking the difficult questions.

Commitment

Knowing the legal dimensions of planning and zoning, good design technique, and group strategy is as important as knowing how to deal with the public. But underlying all of this is the willingness of commissioners to invest the time to be effective as a group.

It is more than time spent in meetings. There may be mounds of paper to be read and contemplated. There is the time needed to learn planning and zoning law and how to read a site plan; time needed to learn the physical aspects of the community; and to personally inspect the sites that are subjects of important votes. In addition, there are the musings about the more subtle social and economic aspects and how they function together to build “community.”

Integrity

Other sought after qualities include personal integrity and dedication to democratic procedure and outcomes. Some may find it difficult to stand against a group of residents who vehemently protest actions they dislike. Decisions to ban all mobile home parks, sanitary landfills, gravel pits, and junkyards to some other community, for instance, may be popular. Individually, commissioners may even object to such land uses. It is important, however, that commissioners understand the legal prohibitions against exclusionary zoning—using zoning to keep “undesired” development out of the community. Personal integrity may thus require planning commissioners to override their own emotional preferences and vote to permit such land uses when facts so dictate.

Self-Directed

Finally, planning commissioners must be individuals who do not mind making their contribution in relative obscurity. Seldom are they the subject of a feature newspaper or television report. And except on hotly debated issues, their actions are found mostly on the back pages of the weekly newspaper. Few in the community will thank planning commissioners for their years of service. Not because residents are ungrateful; rather, it is because few have the patience to track the results of community planning—the transformation of ideas to reality. The reward for planning

commissioners is seeing plans that were once little more than pipe dreams come to life.