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## **Educating the Public**

A key element of any planning program is education. The value of and the need for planning and zoning must be promulgated at every turn. It is the planning commission's responsibility to inform and educate the public about the planning process and relevant issues affecting the community. Ultimately, educating the public is in the planning commission's best interest—an informed public can provide vital information to decision makers.

The following article, reprinted from *The Commissioner*, a publication of the American Planning Association, provides planning commissioners (and board members and council members, alike) with information on keeping the public informed.

## **Going Public**

*By Karen Finucan*

"As planning commissioners, we have a responsibility to keep the public informed and involved," says Pat Sheffels, a former planning commissioner in Bellevue, Washington. Part of that obligation," she said, "includes explaining the role and responsibilities of the planning commission, and facilitating public participation at meetings."

Community outreach, while considered essential by most planning commissions, is time intensive and often gets pushed to the back burner, says Larry Springer, manager of the Administrative Services Division of the Snohomish County, Washington, Department of Planning and Development Services. Nearly two years ago, Springer's division re-evaluated the way in which it provided information to the public about the work of the planning commission. "We realized that more than 50 percent of the homes in our county have Internet access, and that there is access through the libraries, so we decided to make much of our information available online."

While the Internet has a role in planning commission outreach, there is still a segment of the population that is "locked out without the web," notes Springer. It is incumbent upon planning commissions to reach out to this group, he says.

Sheffels agrees, but contends that "there's a dual responsibility on the part of the public to inform themselves and to get involved. ... It's not all the responsibility of the planning commission."

"In many cases the only time that people touch government is when they get their licenses renewed, go to the voting booth, or when something happens in their neighborhood," says Don Oppliger, chairman of the planning commission in Lenexa, Kansas. Rezoning and other neighborhood land-use issues "present a real opportunity to educate residents about the process," he says.

Lorie Garcia, a planning commissioner in Santa Clara, California, agrees, suggesting that commissions employ a large notification area. "There's nothing that says you have to go with the minimum state requirements," she says. "The last thing you want to do is end up with someone who's irate because he didn't get notified," says Garcia. "That's a lost opportunity. It's tough to educate and inform in the face of anger."

### **Online Education**

For many planning commissions, outreach often takes place one citizen at a time. "It can be very time intensive," says Carmen Foss, a senior secretary in the Snohomish County Department of Planning and Development Services. Foss, who helped develop some of the information on the department's website, finds that the Internet provides tremendous savings — both in terms of time and expense. "Now when people call, I refer them to our website. If they have questions, I can walk them through the site on the phone," she says. "People appreciate the fact that they can get it all online — that they don't have to make a special trip to our office."

In both Snohomish County and Lenexa, the planning commission uses e-mail to notify interested parties about upcoming meetings. "What I e-mail is a link to our website," says Foss, who posts the agenda, and as much supporting documentation as is available, on the website at least 10 days prior to the commission's meeting.

An unscientific survey of dozens of planning commission websites revealed that a majority have some information about the board's role and responsibilities. Too often, however, the information is not written for the lay person, quoting extensively from ordinances and bylaws. Several sites rose above the rest, both in terms of content and presentation.

When the planning commission in Fairfax County, Virginia, decided to go online a couple of years ago, "we started going through all the questions people ask," says Barbara Lippa, the commission's executive director. The result is a web page called "Frequently Asked Questions." The page responds to more than a dozen common inquiries:

- Why did I receive a notice of a public hearing? Am I required to attend the public hearing?
- How can I obtain a copy of the staff report for a pending land use application?
- When and where does the Planning Commission hold its meetings? What time do meetings begin?
- What is the order of the scheduled agenda items?
- Will I be notified if a public hearing is postponed?
- How can I voice my opinion on an application if I am unable to attend the hearing?
- What does the Planning Commission do?
- How are Commissioners appointed?
- How does one qualify to be a Planning Commission member?
- Are Planning Commissioners paid?

"The availability of this information online has greatly reduced the number of phone calls we've had to deal with," says Lippa. "We've heard nothing but good things about it from the public."

### **Media Outreach**

The city's quarterly newsletter and the local newspaper help spread word about the work of Lenexa's planning commission, according to Pintar. "From time to time, we'll take a page of the city's newsletter and do an article about the role of the commission, or our procedures, or how citizens can become involved," he says. "We also invite media coverage. Over the years, we've developed a pretty good relationship with the press, says Pintar. "The print media are really pretty good at covering our events which, of course, helps us get the message out."

Since the beginning of the year, "The Planning Commission Roundtable" has been bringing county land-use issues into the homes of Fairfax residents. Each month, this 30-minute, cable television program, moderated by the commission chairman, examines a specific topic such as tree preservation, residential development criteria, or the capital improvement program. It also features a "'planning commission mailbag,' whereby people can submit questions for our commissioners to answer," says Lippa. Videotapes of previous shows can be ordered from the county's Communication Production Division. "In the case of the residential density criteria, we had tapes made and sent them to each of the supervisors' offices to be shared with local groups," says Lippa. "We were really changing the process and wanted people to understand that," she says.

Planning commission meetings are routinely aired on Fairfax County Cable Channel 16, Lippa says. Apart from keeping the citizenry informed, these broadcasts also allow people who might wish to take part in a meeting or public hearing to familiarize themselves with the commission's workings in advance of their scheduled participation, she says.

## **Preparing to Participate**

"When something happens in a neighborhood, it's often a once-in-a-lifetime issue, and almost always emotionally charged," says Oppliger of the planning commission in Lenexa. "It's important that people understand the process and their role in it," he adds. To that end, Lenexa's website contains a well-written overview of meeting procedures to help members of the public prepare their presentations. "We didn't create this to be read by lawyers," says Oppliger. "Our feeling was that if it were written for the average person, it would be used — and it absolutely is being used." Beginning with the phrase, "I haven't done this before...," the web page explains who will be at the meeting, how to prepare for it, what the individual's role is and how things will work when she takes to the podium. It also lays out the decision-making process and possible outcomes.

Having recently installed new audiovisual equipment in the city council chambers, the City of Sunnyvale, California, website offers tips on using an overhead projector, slides, video cassettes, PowerPoint presentations, and wireless microphones. "The materials presented will appear on the monitors in the Chambers and possibly broadcast through KSUN (the government access cable channel)," the page notes.

The "Public Hearing Procedures" on the Snohomish County website is user friendly. With sections titled "Before the Hearing," "At the Hearing," and "Decorum," the page prepares participants for the hearing and makes suggestions to enhance presentations. "It's important that everyone feel comfortable and welcome," says Foss, "and the only way that happens is if people know what their rights and privileges are as part of the hearing." The Snohomish website also allows visitors who cannot attend the public hearing to "submit testimony or become a party of record" with the click of a mouse.

Not only do visitors to the Fairfax County website find a nicely summarized discussion of the planning commission's "Meetings and Procedures," but they may register to testify at a public hearing. "Many people take advantage of this option," says Lippa, "and when they sign up by the specified date, their name appears on the website." Lippa is quick to point out that people may still speak at a public hearing if they don't register in advance, "but they'll get a different amount of time," she says.

## **Promoting Participation**

"Those few minutes before the planning commission may be the only chance an individual has to make his case, and if he's scared to death he's not going to succeed," says Lenexa's Oppliger, "My job as chairman is to put his mind at ease." Oppliger does this by taking time to explain the process, the commission's role and the role of the public. He also describes the possible outcomes and next steps. "We go to great lengths to show respect for the general public, and to remind those in attendance that everyone — the homeowner, the developer — has rights and deserves to be treated with respect."

"Enforcing the rules is key," says Sheffels in Bellevue. "Everyone needs to play by the same rules. No one should be treated differently or appear to be treated differently. Consistency is important," she says.

"If you've never attended a planning commission meeting before, you could easily be intimidated — especially here in Fairfax," says Lippa. "We're in a big, big room and everything seems so formal," she says. To ease any anxiety, Lippa's staff distributes handouts that explain the process, and offers seating charts. "If you sit in the back you often can't see the commissioners and their names aren't always visible on [the television] screen," she says.

In Santa Clara, California, the planning commission will hold its study sessions in chambers at city hall. "It gets people familiar with city hall before the public hearing process kicks in," says Garcia. "It takes away the intimidation factor. If someone's never been to a meeting before it can be quite overwhelming — what with all those mini-gods looking down from above," she says.

An informed and educated public is essential to the smooth functioning of the planning commission, says Oppliger of Lenexa. And planning commissioners have a unique opportunity to facilitate a deeper understanding of the planning process. "I enjoy helping the public come into the governmental process and leave with a good understanding, if not a good feeling, about what happened during the process and with a sense that they were treated fairly."

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