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The following two articles, reprinted with permission from *The Commissioner*, a publication of the American Planning Association, provides community officials, appointed and elected, with tips to sharpen their performance and an exploration of the important process of developing regulations.

How to be a Better Planning Commissioner

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For the newly appointed member, service on a planning commission can be overwhelming during the first few months. It's like you've been plopped down in a foreign country and have to learn a strange language and a new road system--and sometimes the natives aren't so friendly! Here are nine tips for the neophyte and, yes, even the veteran commission member to help sharpen performance.

1. Meet with the planning director.

Discuss where he or she thinks the commission should go during the next several years. What are the major, recurring issues facing the commission and the community? How has the commission addressed them? Is the commission split, or does it work like a team, even when individual members disagree with each other?

2. Review the commission agenda.

With the planning director's assistance, review the agenda for the first few meetings until you feel confident of your role. The agenda should be organized so that each action item has a supporting staff report. Check to see if these staff reports are both clearly written and thorough. Make certain that if commission members ask for supplemental information, those requests are answered.

3. Read and absorb.

Become familiar with the plans you oversee and the regulations that guide the commission's deliberations. At a minimum, as a new planning commission member,

you should review the most recent edition of the community's comprehensive plan, the zoning ordinance, and subdivision regulations. Ask the following questions. When was the plan last updated? Have special studies or area plans been completed since then? What revisions have been made to the zoning ordinance and subdivision regulations?

4. Master the rules of procedure.

Every commission should have these rules because they determine how you conduct your meetings and decide issues. Equally important, the rules assures the public that business is conducted in an orderly, fair and democratic manner. Indeed, the commission's credibility is tied to its procedural rules and how they are applied. The rules are not cast in stone, however, and may be amended; the planning commission should feel comfortable with them. Remember, state statutes change, affecting open meetings or "sunshine" laws, ethical requirements for elected and appointed officials, and availability of public records, among others. State and federal court decisions will also influence how your planning commission conducts its business. For those reasons, it's prudent for the planning commission to evaluate its rules periodically.

5. Set aside time for long-range thinking and brainstorming.

Step back. Look at the big picture. This is really what the planning should be doing. If your evening meeting doesn't leave much time (or energy) for this, then schedule periodic special meetings or retreats for the commission.

6. Meet with the legislative body at least once a year.

Planning commissioners are most effective when they anticipate the needs of the elected officials who have appointed them. The commission and the legislative body need to discuss their expectations of each other. Regular meetings keep lines of communication open between the two bodies, preventing rifts and misunderstandings.

7. Publish an annual report.

It should contain a list of actions taken by the commission during the year, as well as a comparison between the commission's recommendations and the legislative body's actions. Use the report to convey planning advice to the legislative body and general public by proposing needed studies, plans, ordinance amendments, and capital projects.

8. Continue to learn.

Learn about planning and the role of planning commissions in shaping the community. APA chapters have special tracks at state conferences or annual workshops devoted to planning commissions. APA's Planners Book Service sells a number of inexpensive books expressly written for commissioners: Albert Solnit's *The Job of the Planning Commissioner*; William Toner, Efraim Gil, and Enid Lucchesi's *Planning Made Easy*; Herbert H. Smith's *A Citizen's Guide to Planning* and *A Citizen's Guide to Zoning*; and David J. Allor's, *The Planning Commissioner's Guide*. Training videos, such as *Meeting Management: A Mock Commission Hearing* are also available.

9. Keep an open mind.

Always be a statesman. You've been appointed to the planning commission because your elected officials thought you had good judgment and sound character. You'll find you'll be most effective when you remain open to new ideas and concepts that can help your community solve the complex problems of growth and change.