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The Planning and Zoning Officials Academy provides local elected and appointed officials with both basic and advanced topics addressing issues unique to the role as a local government representative. The article is used with permission by the American Planning Association. "It Sounded So Easy" by Scott Bartley (*The Commissioner*, Spring 2007).

It Sounded So Easy

By Scott Bartley

Ah, the challenges of chairing a planning commission. It sounded so easy when I said yes, and of course the reality is that it frequently is any thing but.

As an architect I pride myself on being analytical and well structured when dealing with a problem. Often this serves me well but at other times it can make a problem worse than it was to begin with. No one wants to end up with their foot firmly planted in their mouth, but it does happen. I am speaking from experience here. It seems that every time I stand firm and resolute on an issue which I am convinced that my opinion is THE RIGHT ONE, I find myself eventually trying to extricate my foot from my mouth.

The lesson there, which I still have to remind myself of when I feel my feet plant, is stop talking and start listening — really listening. Years ago, while chairing a design review board meeting, I, in my stridency, made a member of the public so angry with both me and the process that she stood up and decided to get involved herself. That woman is now my vice chair and a truly superb planning commissioner. Working with her has meant that I need to drop my guard, listen, and learn. While I have good knowledge of issues of the built environment, she has great knowledge of the human aspects of our general plan. She has educated me and helped me grow in my position, and I believe I have helped her understand the constraints the built environment can sometimes present in implementing our plan.

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What makes our current commission successful is that we all listen. We listen to each other, to the public, and to staff. It does not always lead to consensus (acknowledging that many items on your commission agenda eventually has a winner and a loser), but it does help with respect. The greatest compliment I can receive is when the person on the losing end of an issue comes to me afterwards and says: "While I don't agree with your decision, I do respect the fact that you listened."

As a commissioner your duty is to listen to all the facts and opinions revolving around an issue without letting personalities or ego get in the way. People fundamentally want to be heard. Even if you end up not agreeing with them, the act of truly listening goes a long way towards consensus.