



Planning and Zoning Officials Academy Vol. 11, No. 11

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.

Communicating with the Citizenry

How do residents learn about planning commission decisions?

- All meetings are announced in a public posting and held in a location available to the general public.
- All deliberations and decisions are made at a meeting open to the public. The public can address the commission at hearings and regular meetings following guidelines established by the commission.
- All records, files, publications, correspondence, and other materials are available to the public for reading, copying, or other purposes.
- Proposed minutes must be available for public inspection eight business days after the meeting, while approved minutes must be available five business days after the meeting at which the minutes were approved.
- Many communities have web pages that provide current information about planning commission decisions.

Successful Media Relations

Every planning commission should develop and maintain good relations with the various media in their community. Writers and reporters for the various media outlets depend on community representatives, often planning commissioners, to secure information about topics of interest to their readers. Always remember that as a community planner, you are the specialist and the news media depend on you to provide them with accurate and well-defined information. If your media releases are clear and comprehensible, you are more likely to get the attention that you desire. There are many ways to use the media to your advantage:

The Interview. There are several steps that can be taken to ensure a smooth transfer of information from the planning commissioner to the media representative.



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- Find out what they want to talk about. This gives you a chance to decide generally what you will say and how you will say it. A written outline is always helpful.
- Bring in additional experts. If there are others in your community who may have valuable input such as elected officials, staff people or consultants, bring them into the interview too. Determine in advance what each participant is responsible for covering.
- Control the territory. Whenever possible, hold the interview in your office, on other familiar turf, or on a site that illustrates the issue.
- Don't fall for baited questions. Keep your answers short and informative. Be quotable by avoiding long and complicated sentences. Use plain English, and answer the questions that are asked.
- Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know," as long as you follow that up with "but I will get the information for you", and then get the information.
- Never say anything you do not want repeated in the media. Even if you insist that something is off the record, things have a way of being included in an article even without direct attribution to the planning commissioner.
- Summarize at the end of the interview. Ask if there are any unanswered questions.

Guest Editorials. A guest editorial is typically well read and can be an excellent way to state briefly and thoughtfully a planning commission undertaking or program.

Press Release. This is a common, inexpensive, much used form of communication. It should not be relied on entirely to entice the media to cover your event, but can be used in conjunction with other methods. The following tips will help ensure that the media outlet you have selected will consider your press release:

- Know to whom the press release should go. Keep your media contact lists updated. Spell names correctly. Send the press release on official office stationary. If in doubt about the appropriate recipient, send it to the editor in chief or city editor of newspapers, and the manager or assignment editor of radio and TV stations.
- Always indicate a release date. "For immediate release" is common.
- Write in a traditional who, what, where, when and how format, but use a catchy headline to get your readers attention.

Getting Your Meeting Announced

Do not limit your attempts at print coverage to the local newspaper. In most communities, there are college, high school, and neighborhood newspapers; church, community, and organizational newsletters; and local special interest publications. Your message can be tailored to the audiences of each publication, further increasing your chances of getting print exposure.



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- Pay for advertising. If you really want publicity, pay for it. Some advantages of paid advertising include: you can choose the medium and you can completely control the message.
- Approach a general interest columnist. Every community has at least one who is well read and widely quoted. Most columnists write human interest stories. Read local columns regularly to get a feel for the style and content of your local writers, and then approach them with your idea.

Internal Mechanisms for Exposure

You may have the ability within your own community to disseminate information.

- Community Web page. If you have a web page, you can post your meeting information and update it regularly.
- Develop an email/ mailing list. There are many citizens in your community who regularly attend meetings or provide input to the planning commission. Develop a mailing list and keep them informed of the activities of the planning commission.
- Create a project specific newsletter. This could be particularly useful when covering something like the development of a comprehensive plan. Updates can be sent to a large number of people on a regular basis in a fun and informational manner.

Excerpted from the "Meetings" chapter of the Michigan Association of Planning's Planning Commissioner's Toolkit.

To purchase a copy of the Toolkit, contact MAP at (734)913-2000.