



**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 unique to the role as a local government representative. The article is used with permission by the American Planning Association. "Six Things I Wish I Had Known When I First Became a Planning Commissioner" by Phillip H. Klotz, AICP (*The Commissioner*, Spring 2006).

The Commissioner — Spring 2006  
Commissioner's Voice

**Six Things I Wish I Had Known When I First Became a Planning Commissioner**

By Philip H. Klotz, AICP

I was first appointed to a municipal planning commission 22 years ago. I was still "green" in community planning. The municipality, a township of more than 14,000 people in eastern Pennsylvania, had a diverse five-member planning commission. Also, we were fortunate to have a municipal engineer and attorney at all our meetings, which provided a fostering environment. From this initial experience, I share my lessons learned:

**1. Keep Your Nose Clean.** My initial appointment was to complete the term of a member who was 20 years my senior. He gave me one piece of advice: "Keep your nose clean." It is critical for a planning commissioner to maintain independence, neutrality, and objectivity in an environment of often competing interests. Every commissioner should strive to ensure an unbiased process, uphold the commission's credibility, and, most importantly, maintain the public trust. Abiding by the APA Ethical Principles in Planning is very helpful.

**2. Become Familiar with the Rules of the Road.** Acquire a copy of and become somewhat familiar with your state's planning-related enabling legislation; your state's ethics and "sunshine" laws; and your municipal comprehensive plan, zoning ordinance, and subdivision and land development ordinances. You usually can obtain

the statutes through your state legislator and local documents through your municipality. A basic knowledge of these enables you to make informed, defensible recommendations or decisions, and helps you to "keep your nose clean."

*Note: Michigan's Planning Enabling Law, Public Act 33 of 2008, Michigan's Zoning Enabling Act, Public Act 33 of 2008 (and Public Act 110 of 2006), and other state laws relating to planning may be found on MAP's Web site, [www.planningmi.org](http://www.planningmi.org), under the Advocacy tab.*

**3. Know How to Read and Review Site Plans.** Your ability to correctly read and review site plans, which leads to recommendations or decisions, is key to protecting the public health, safety, and welfare. If you need a better understanding of how to read engineering drawings, perhaps ask your governing body to sponsor training through your education provider. It is important to make sure that site plans meet community standards — the comprehensive plan and municipal ordinances. Consulting with your municipal engineer or planning staff, as well as using a checklist, is helpful in achieving this task. Also, look for "common sense" concerns that may not be specified in an ordinance, but may affect public health, safety, and welfare.

*Note: Michigan Association of Planning offers "Site Plan Review" as an on-site workshop. For more information, please contact MAP.*

**4. Be Careful What You Ask For.** Generally, as long as an applicant complies with the provisions of your municipal ordinances, you must recommend or grant approval of a site plan. Any standards and conditions that a municipality applies and requires for plan approval have to benefit the public health, safety, and welfare. Be careful not to include a specific condition or a monetary exaction as a basis for disapproval unless it is authorized in state law or your local ordinances. Requiring what is not authorized could result in litigation.

**5. Do Your Homework.** When I was first asked to serve on a planning commission, a governing body member told me that it didn't take much time — only one two-hour meeting a month. What I quickly realized was the considerable preparation required to do a responsible job. Prior to a meeting, request copies of the site plan applications that are on the upcoming agenda, along with any municipal comments. Allow adequate time to review the plan in the context of the municipal ordinances and comments. As part of this process, it is essential to conduct a site visit to fully realize any effects on and from the proposal. Contact the municipal staff or engineer in advance with questions that would facilitate your review.

**6. Don't Be Afraid to Ask.** If you are uncertain about something, ask the appropriate authority. Often, admitting that you don't know is the first step in acquiring the

knowledge required to do your job properly. Remember, always contact your municipal staff first so that they are not "blindsided" about your inquiry of a third party. In fact, the municipal staff may have the information you need.

Sidebar:

### **APA Ethical Principles in Planning**

**The planning process must continuously pursue and faithfully serve the public interest.**

Planning Process Participants should:

1. Recognize the rights of citizens to participate in planning decisions;
2. Strive to give citizens (including those who lack formal organization or influence) full, clear and accurate information on planning issues and the opportunity to have a meaningful role in the development of plans and programs;
3. Strive to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of disadvantaged groups and persons;
4. Assist in the clarification of community goals, objectives and policies in plan-making;
5. Ensure that reports, records and any other non-confidential information which is, or will be, available to decision makers is made available to the public in a convenient format and sufficiently in advance of any decision;
6. Strive to protect the integrity of the natural environment and the heritage of the built environment;
7. Pay special attention to the interrelatedness of decisions and the long range consequences of present actions.

**Planning process participants continuously strive to achieve high standards of integrity and proficiency so that public respect for the planning process will be maintained.**

Planning Process Participants should:

1. Exercise fair, honest and independent judgment in their roles as decision makers and advisors;
2. Make public disclosure of all "personal interests" they may have regarding any decision to be made in the planning process in which they serve, or are requested to serve, as advisor or decision maker.

3. Define "personal interest" broadly to include any actual or potential benefits or advantages that they, a spouse, family member or person living in their household might directly or indirectly obtain from a planning decision;
4. Abstain completely from direct or indirect participation as an advisor or decision maker in any matter in which they have a personal interest, and leave any chamber in which such a matter is under deliberation, unless their personal interest has been made a matter of public record; their employer, if any, has given approval; and the public official, public agency or court with jurisdiction to rule on ethics matters has expressly authorized their participation;
5. Seek no gifts or favors, nor offer any, under circumstances in which it might reasonably be inferred that the gifts or favors were intended or expected to influence a participant's objectivity as an advisor or decision maker in the planning process;
6. Not participate as an advisor or decision maker on any plan or project in which they have previously participated as an advocate;
7. Serve as advocates only when the client's objectives are legal and consistent with the public interest.
8. Not participate as an advocate on any aspect of a plan or program on which they have previously served as advisor or decision maker unless their role as advocate is authorized by applicable law, agency regulation, or ruling of an ethics officer or agency; such participation as an advocate should be allowed only after prior disclosure to, and approval by, their affected client or employer; under no circumstance should such participation commence earlier than one year following termination of the role as advisor or decision maker;
9. Not use confidential information acquired in the course of their duties to further a personal interest;
10. Not disclose confidential information acquired in the course of their duties except when required by law, to prevent a clear violation of law or to prevent substantial injury to third persons; provided that disclosure in the latter two situations may not be made until after verification of the facts and issues involved and consultation with other planning process participants to obtain their separate opinions;
11. Not misrepresent facts or distort information for the purpose of achieving a desired outcome;
12. Not participate in any matter unless adequately prepared and sufficiently capacitated to render thorough and diligent service;
13. Respect the rights of all persons and not improperly discriminate against or harass others based on characteristics which are protected under civil rights laws and regulations.