

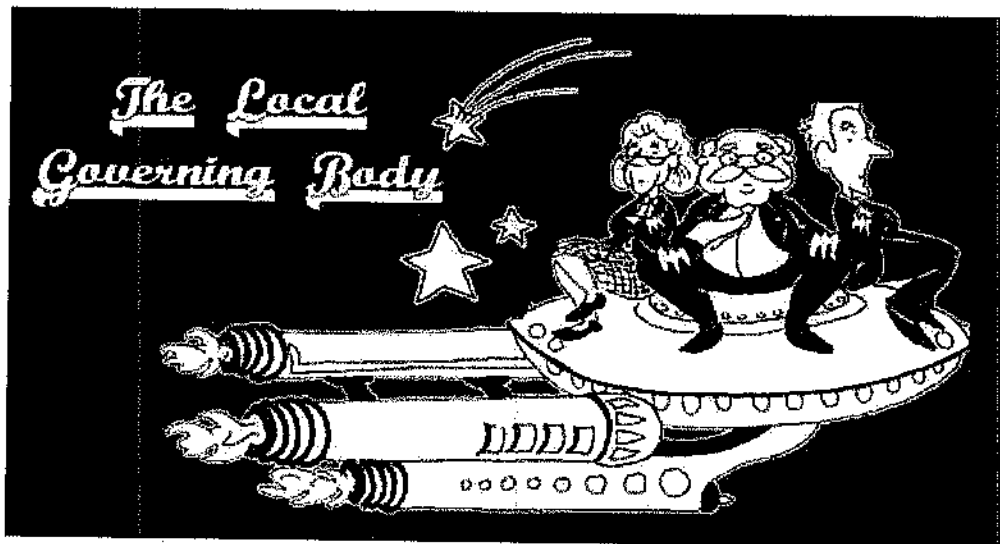
Special Feature

Strengthening the Planning Commission – Governing Body Relationship

October 21st, 2014

Summary:

One of the most important relationships in the "planning universe" is that between the governing body and the planning commission.



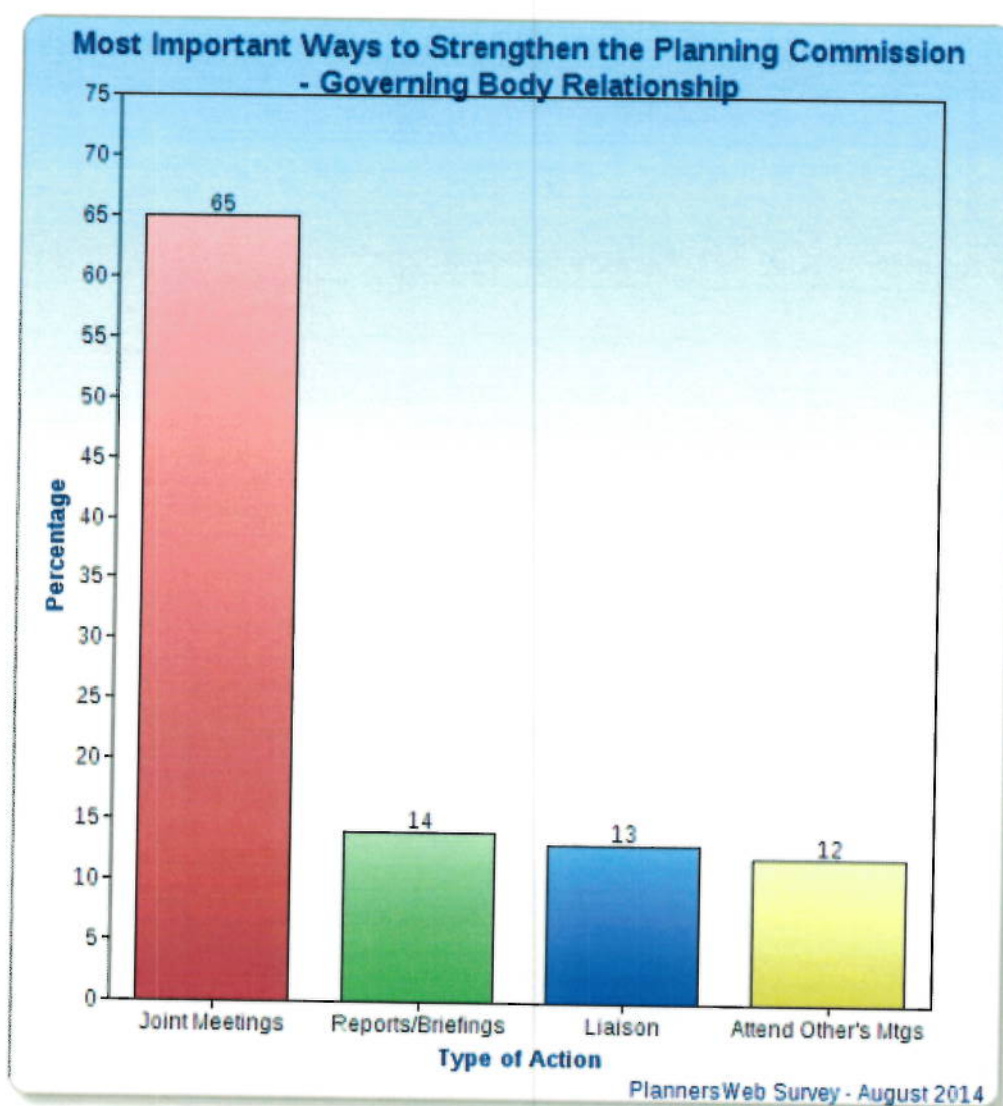
We wanted to hear back from our survey respondents on what they've done -- or think they should do -- to improve the relationship between the two bodies. Here's what we asked in two related questions:

Please list up to three things that have been done in your community to help strengthen the relationship between your planning commission and governing body.

If there was one thing that could be done to most improve the relationship between your planning commission and governing body, what would that be?

We received replies from 225 individuals. As with our other open-ended questions, we found that most replies could be grouped into several categories:

1. **Joint Meetings.** This was by far the most frequently mentioned suggestion. 146 of our 225 respondents (65 percent) mentioned it as either something they were already doing (106) or that they thought they should be doing (40). What's more, 22 of those who said they were already holding joint meetings said they should have more of them.
2. **Reports & Briefings.** Thirty-two individuals indicated that they had used reports or briefings as a way of improving the connection between the planning board and governing body.
3. **Liaison.** Comments from 29 individuals reported that using liaisons between the two bodies had helped strengthen their relationship.
4. **Attending Each Other's Meetings.** Twenty-seven people recommended that planning commissioners attend governing body meetings and vice-versa.



Percentage of respondents who mentioned each type of action as one of their suggestions.

There were several other groupings of comments, which we'll also mention below.

Details on What We Heard:

1. Joint Meetings

As we noted, 65 percent of our respondents noted they were already holding joint meetings between the planning commission and governing body. This was by far the most frequent response to our question about ways of strengthening the planning commission - governing body relationship.

Many of the replies were similar to these: "hold joint work sessions," "annual joint meeting," "city council retreats with commission," "joint meetings to get issues on the table," and "visit sites together."

A Kansas planning commissioner noted that commissioners and governing body members had taken "tours together" and held an "annual recognition dinner," while a California planner said they "conduct an annual joint tour of the city to see how the codes are working." Conduct an annual joint tour of the city to see how the codes are working.

A planner from Washington wrote that their commission and governing body held joint retreats in order to "clarify roles and responsibilities."

As noted earlier, 22 of those who said they were already holding joint meetings commented on the value of having them more often. Several individuals who said their planning commission had annual joint meetings felt it would be better to have several each year.

2. Reports & Briefings

All told, 32 individuals mentioned that preparing reports, providing briefings, or sharing minutes and agendas served as a way of strengthening the relationship between the governing body and planning commission.

Most comments were similar to the following: "Planning Commission Chairman provides annual report to Village Board," "Review minutes of each others meetings," "Provide reports to both boards on activities," and "Staff presentations to the governing body."

3. Liaison

A number of communities appear to have either a city council member, the mayor, or someone else serve as a liaison with the planning commission, as 29 of our respondents mentioned this as a way they've strengthened the relationship between their community's governing body and planning board.

Most comments were like these: "Liaison city councilor attends planning commission meetings and reports to City Council on deliberations and discussions," and "One County Commissioner is assigned as liaison to the County Planning Commission." Several comments mentioned that their liaison is a voting member of the planning commission.

4. Attending Each Others Meetings

The 27 comments we placed in this category overlap slightly with the role of a liaison. But we felt these comments were sufficiently distinct, as they related to a less formal role or approach than when there is a designated liaison.

Members of the governing body attend many planning commission meetings. For example, a California planning commissioner noted that in their community "each Council meeting has a commissioner assigned to attend and take notes," while a planning commissioner from Delaware replied that "members of the governing body attend many planning commission meetings." Similarly, a Virginia planning commissioner said that the "Planning Commission chair (me) often attends Council work sessions."

An Idaho planner made an important distinction in writing that governing body members attend "planning workshops, not public hearings."

Other Comments:

We received a wide assortment of additional suggestions. In looking through them, we did notice several groupings of related comments.

Informal, Personal Contacts

Thirteen comments mentioned the importance of informal contacts, connections, or networking between planning commissioners and governing body members.

Among the comments: "I personally talk with at least one of the Council once every two weeks," "constructive informal communications between PC Chair and Elected board Chair," "personal relationships with mayor and council members," and "meet informally one on one."

However, perhaps the ultimate in informal communications we heard about: "My husband is a member of the governing body! :)" [emphasis and emoticon in original].

Former Planning Commission Members Serving on Governing Body

We heard from seven individuals who noted that having former planning commissioners serving on the governing body, or as mayor, can strengthen the relationship between the two bodies.

Many members of the planning commission have become members of the governing body. For example, a Michigan planning commissioner noted that the former Vice Chair of their Planning Commission "was elected to City Council and is now Mayor," while a Missouri planning commissioner wrote that "many members of the planning commission have become members of the governing body ... they know how the process works and what the objectives are."

Mutual Respect

Four individuals mentioned the importance of mutual respect or trust as important to the commission-governing body relationship.

As a Kansas planner wrote, "Establish a high degree of trust."

Role of Appointment Process

Interestingly, three comments noted the importance of appointing planning commissioners as a way of strengthening the commission-governing body relationship.

For example, a Virginia planner wrote "careful selection of new Planning Commission members." It makes sense that governing bodies that take more care when deciding who to appoint to the commission may well end up with a stronger connection to the commission.

Broadcasting Meetings

We already noted that several comments mentioned the value of sharing meeting minutes. Another way -- noted in three comments -- for governing body members to keep track of what the planning commission is focusing on (and vice-versa) is by watching the other body's meetings.

Comprehensive Plan Process

Three comments also pointed out that the comprehensive planning process can provide a good way of strengthening the link between governing bodies and planning commissions.

As an individual from Pennsylvania who has served as a planning commissioner and elected official noted, "There is constant interaction between staff, elected and appointed officials during meetings of our comp plan committees."



Staff's Role

Several individuals pointed to the role that staff plays in fostering communications between planning commissions and governing bodies.

An Ohio planner noted that they held "monthly meetings with staff and Commission Chair and Council Rep," while a planner from Iowa said, "Staff acts as the go between when one board or the other has questions for the other board ... educates the planning commission and governing body on current issues, and provides opportunities to go to training together."

... And Don't Forget

One final way of strengthening the planning commission - governing body relationship we had to make note of: "Make sure the governing body looks good," a Rhode Island planner noted.

Editor's Note: Want to read more about ways of improving the relationship between the planning commission and governing body, see:

- "[Working Effectively With Elected Officials](#)," by Elaine Cogan
- "[Linking Elected Officials With Planning](#)," by Michael Chandler
- "[Town Councils and Planning Boards: A Challenging Relationship](#)," by Pamela Plumb

and if you're a planning commissioner thinking -- perhaps -- of running for a seat on the governing body, or other office, take a look at Otis White's "[Should You Run?](#)"

Coming Next: [Improving Planning Commission Effectiveness](#)

Tags: [Being Effective](#), [Local Governing Body](#), [Miscellany](#)

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Town Councils and Planning Boards:

A CHALLENGING RELATIONSHIP

by Pamela Plumb

There has always been a delicate dance in the relationship between Town Councils and their appointed Planning Boards. Perhaps it comes from the community emotion that inevitably surrounds local land use issues. Perhaps it is rooted in a lack of clarity about their different roles. Whatever the origins of this tension, the relationship is frequently a source of debate and occasionally a source of friction. I would like to offer a few thoughts on what that relationship might ideally look like and make some suggestions on how to encourage that positive result.

A misunderstanding of roles is the most frequent barrier to a positive relationship between councils and planning boards. What are the roles? The Council begins with the responsibility of appointing the members of the Board. It is the Council's job to create a capable Board with a balance of experience and expertise. However, the Council then needs to leave the Board to do its job.

The two groups have distinctly different jobs. Councilors are policy makers. They are elected by and are responsive to the public whom they represent in all its various constituencies. The Board members, on the other hand, are not policy makers. They are appointed to work within the ordinances adopted by the Council. They work within already established policy and do not change policy based on public comment. Even if the room is packed with citizens arguing that a permitted use be denied in a site plan hearing, it is not the Planning Board's role to change what is or is not permitted. Its role is to apply the given ordinance.

If the public does not like what the ordinance permits, then the Council is the place to get it changed. Similarly, if the Board is concerned about the impacts of applying a given ordinance, its option is

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to recommend changes to the Council.

Even in the process of rewriting or developing new ordinances, the Council is still the policy maker. The Board functions like a technical consultant to the Council recommending effective ways to accomplish the general community goals requested by the Council. The Council gives a sense of direction to the Board. The Board then uses its specialized background and expertise to make recommendations back to the Council.

The recommendations may be creative and far reaching. They may be more complex or technically innovative than the Council ever imagined. But, it is the Council that makes the final decision with whatever political considerations it deems appropriate. Each role is vital to a smoothly functioning community. But they are separate. If the Board tries to set policy or the Council tries to interfere with the application of the ordinance or fails to value the technical advice of the Board, confusion and trouble will follow.

Equally important to a positive relationship is effective and appropriate com-

munication. When and how should the Council and the Board communicate? Should Councilors lobby Board members as the Board carries out its work? Should Board members consult with individual Councilors before making decisions or recommendations? Neither is likely to be helpful.

There needs to be a way for the Council to provide collective guidance, rather than disjointed or individual points of view which might not represent the view of the whole. There needs to be a way for the Board to share with the Council the background and thought process that leads up to a recommendation for a zone change or a new ordinance.

Although much of the work in small towns seems to get done around people's kitchen tables or in the aisles of the grocery store, clear and formal avenues of

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PLANNING COMMISSIONERS **Journal**

In Coming Issues ...

- Local planning for greenways and bicycle paths.
- When attorneys appear before planning boards.
- How to preserve a community's heritage.
- The home occupation boom & its planning impacts.
- Are there lessons from Scandinavia's "eco-community" planning?
- Preparing for public hearings.
- Understanding "spot" zoning.

And more from our regular columnists.

Linking Elected Officials with Planning

by Michael Chandler

Three years ago I wrote an article entitled "The Planning Universe: A Quick Tour." *PCJ* #35 (Summer 1999). The goal of that article was the identification of key participants in the planning process. Included in the galaxy of players was the local governing body. I suggested the governing body's connection to planning centered on three key events: (1) the appointment of the planning commission; (2) the adoption of a comprehensive plan; and (3) the administration of zoning ordinances, subdivision ordinances, and other regulations designed to bring the comprehensive plan to life.

The aim of this article is to examine in greater detail the role elected officials play in the planning process and the value and importance planners and planning commissioners should associate with elected officials. First, however, allow me to briefly revisit the role of planners and planning commissioners.

Planners and Planning Commissioners

Staff planners wear several different hats. They function as creative visionaries helping set out possibilities for their community's future. At the same time, they advocate on behalf of citizens faced with here-and-now problems. In their "convener" role, they coordinate multiple goals, objectives, and policies in an environment featuring competing interests and values. Of course, they also handle the daily grist of reviewing development proposals, responding to requests for information, and doing the hundred-and-one tasks that planning offices are responsible for.

Planning commissioners also wear several hats. They often serve as a sounding board for the community, listening to ideas (and complaints) about a range of neighborhood and citywide or countywide issues. Commissioners also act as consensus-builders, involving the public

in the discussion and resolution of land use issues – a job often done through the process of preparing or updating the comprehensive plan. In many states, planning commissioners also wear the hat of decision maker when acting on proposed subdivisions and other developments.

Elected Officials

Elected officials serving on the local governing body also perform multiple roles in the planning process. Because the governing body controls local purse strings, it directly influences the size and scope of the local planning program. Elected officials also function as decision makers when adopting changes to land use ordinances, and when allocating funds for infrastructure improvements and other projects. In some states, local governing bodies also have final say on development approvals.

More broadly, governing bodies have a critical role in setting the community's agenda. Given the importance of the comprehensive plan in identifying community goals and objectives – and how these will be accomplished – it makes sense for the governing body to be more than a mere spectator to the comprehensive planning process. This involvement, ideally, will translate into a sense of ownership and commitment to the plans and ordinances that result from this process.

Why Engage the Elected Official?

Despite the above, I know that maintaining elected official involvement in the community planning process is often a challenge. But it can be done!

In Blacksburg, Virginia, our town council (on which I've served for the past eighteen years) regularly relies on the comprehensive plan in decision making. As a result, we have been able to minimize the extent to which selected courses of action have been taken in response to emotion and rhetoric – and maximize actions taken which support identified

community goals and policies. This has been possible because our plan relates consequences to actions. Properly done, a solid plan can provide context, background, and an articulated basis for choosing certain courses of action.

Through its reliance on the town plan, our town council also sends a clear message to the community as a whole: planning counts.

Engagement Strategies

Although not mandated by code, most planning commissions would do themselves a huge favor if they invested the time to engage their local officials in planning. There are a variety of strategies a commission can use to enhance its working relationship with the governing body. Some of the more successful approaches include:

1. Planning Commission Annual Report.

A report documenting planning commission activities, and providing an overview of local planning issues and challenges, should be prepared annually and shared with the governing body. In some localities the report also contains the commission's work plan for the coming year. If possible, have the report hand delivered by the commission chair at a regular meeting of the governing body, perhaps with a short accompanying oral presentation.

2. *Joint Work Sessions.* It makes sense for the planning commission and the local governing body to meet at least once a year to discuss matters involving planning, land use, and community change management issues. A working dinner is a common approach. To avoid being haphazard and disjointed, an agenda should be developed and followed.

3. *Joint Visioning Exercise.* Another useful engagement strategy, especially if your locality is preparing or updating its comprehensive plan, is a joint visioning exercise. By including the governing body

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Working Effectively With Elected Officials

by Elaine Cogan

How often have you made a particularly difficult decision as a planning commissioner but then left the room relieved that any angry people you failed to placate can appeal to the governing body?

Most communities give that recourse to citizens and it is generally a good idea. As an appointee, you do not have the same responsibility to the electorate as your community's elected body.

However, you are not doing your proper job as an appointed official if most of your commission's opinions are appealed, and especially, if a majority of your rulings are subsequently overturned. If that happens often, you may think you are taking the high road and the elected officials are merely pandering to the voters; but it also may be a signal that you and your fellow commissioners are out of step or have not done all you could to lobby for your points of view.

Building bridges through effective advocacy is an aspect of your job that is often overlooked.

In small communities, where everyone knows everyone else and the positions on the various boards and commissions — and even membership on the governing body — may, in effect, rotate among public-spirited citizens, relationships are informal and it is easy to have access to the elected decision-makers. Still, other than in formal meetings, many planning board members are reluctant to speak up for their points of view, and thus may lose the opportunity to forge valuable alliances.

In larger communities, planning commissioners may be appointed by the mayor and not even be known to other elected officials. Staff has a stronger role than in smaller areas in carrying out the planning agenda, especially in dealing with other departments such as transportation or public works. However, that should not relieve planning commissioners of their

advocacy responsibilities.

In any community, there are steps you can take to at least make sure planning commission aims and policies are clear to the elected body, with the long-range goal of mutual understanding and support.

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- *Attend your governing body's meeting when an appeal of one of your decisions is being considered.* It may not be pleasant to hear people disagree with you, but the experience will give you some sense of the depth of feeling of elected officials, and the public, on specific issues. If the commission's findings often are overturned because of form or content, you may want to review them with your staff; if the findings are okay but the governing body disagrees with your conclusions, it is still appropriate to revisit the issue informally to see why you are out of step. You may want to try again with a different approach.

- *Be acquainted with the political platforms of the members of the governing body.* Did someone campaign for office promising to end all planning as you know it? That is a clue to how that individual may respond to particular issues. You still should not give up. You or other commissioners should arrange a visit to explain your position and the positive results planning has on your community — and also listen to the elected official's contrary ideas.

- *Do not rely entirely on staff to convey your message.* In most cases, reliance on your professional staff is a satisfactory way to carry out your commission's planning objectives. But if there are certain planning issues on which you feel very strongly, you may be the best one to express it — and it should be to the appropriate elected official, not staff.

- *Enlist the help of the media.* Used sparingly, letters to the editor or "op-ed" or opinion pieces in the local newspaper can be effective in espousing a planning commission point of view that you believe is being maligned or misunderstood. It is better that this be from the entire commission rather than one individual who can be dismissed as a maverick. The objective should be to encourage constructive dialogue, not start a war of words.

- *Suggest a retreat or informal workshop among planning commission members and elected officials to try to come to consensus on a common vision, goals and objectives.* Even if the best you can do is agree to disagree, you will have heard each other and learned something.

The relationship between the elected official and appointed boards such as the planning commission should always be cordial, even in the heat of battle. You can do a great deal to make it so. ♦

Elaine Cogan, partner in the Portland, Oregon, planning and communications firm of Cogan Owens Cogan, is a consultant to many communities undertaking strategic planning or visioning processes. She is a former chair of Portland's development commission. Her column appears in each issue of the *Planning Commissioners Journal*.

