

PLANNING
COMMISSIONERS

Journal

For America's Municipal & County Planning Boards

"Growing" Volunteers

by M. Eileen Hennessy

Volunteers are perhaps the most critical, yet neglected, resource in all communities — but especially in those with little or no professional staff. Staff,

commission chairs, and elective officials need to be able to realize the potential and appreciate the gifts that community

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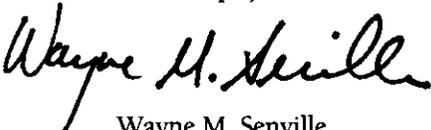
This issue marks the completion of the *Planning Commissioners Journal's* first year. Let me thank each of you for your support of our new publication. During our first year, we've grown from about 200 initial subscribers to close to 600 today. Many of you have also increased the number of copies you're ordering — a vote of confidence we appreciate.

We've tried to cover a wide range of important planning issues. If you skim through the annual index in this issue I think you'll agree. We've also put effort into providing you with articles written in clear and understandable language, and presented in a visually attractive manner.

Our basic goal remains the same as when we started: to provide sound, useful information on many of the issues you deal with as a planning commissioner.

In telephone conversations, a number of you have given very positive feedback about Elaine Cogan's and Greg Dale's columns. I'm glad to be able to say that they both will be continuing to write for the *Journal*. Greg will be alternating his ethics column with one offering an introduction to transportation planning. I'm also pleased to announce that Michael Chandler, who works for the Virginia Cooperative Extension Service and has an excellent reputation for the planning commissioner training programs he runs, will also be writing a regular column for the *Journal*. Mike's column will complement Elaine's by covering topics aimed at helping your board become even more productive.

We're looking ahead to our next six issues — and hope you'll be with us.



Wayne M. Senville
Editor

"Growing" Volunteers

by M. Eileen Hennessy

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Welcoming the Public

by Elaine Cogan

Whuckle when we read about diplomats who spend hours or days arguing about the shape of the negotiating table, but we might be more sympathetic if we realized how even the smallest details contribute to the success of public meetings.

Most planning commissions hold their meetings in rooms that are designed — purposefully or not — to intimidate the public. Commissioners sit on a raised dais, often built of fine, imported wood, high above and yards away from anyone who might want to approach them. Even in those communities where the planning commissioners sit at a table on the same level as the public, they usually huddle together in an unmistakable “we/they” attitude. Often, the room is barely large enough for commissioners and staff; the public, standing uncomfortably against the wall or sitting on unmatched chairs, is treated like intruders.

Even the most sanguine of citizens can become upset and cranky when confronted with such unwelcoming environments. Short of knocking out walls or tearing down the building and starting anew, there are many things that can be done to create an atmosphere in which citizens feel welcome.

But first, examine your own motive honestly. Do you and the other commissioners sincerely welcome and encourage citizen input and participation or do you really wish they would all just go away and let you tend to the business to which you were appointed? If you answer yes to the latter, it would be a charade to try to hold your meetings in a more hospitable environment; your body language and other ways of conveying attitudes would give away your true feelings.

If, however, you are at least tolerant toward the average citizen's comments, there are many things you can do to make

each one feel comfortable at your meetings.

The welcoming environment begins with the treatment citizens receive at the door. Always have handouts to help them keep track of what is happening, preferably on a convenient table nearby the entrance. At the least, have sufficient copies of the agenda; but be sure it is written in

“DO YOU AND THE OTHER COMMISSIONERS SINCERELY WELCOME AND ENCOURAGE CITIZEN INPUT ... OR DO YOU REALLY WISH THEY WOULD ALL JUST GO AWAY AND LET YOU TEND TO THE BUSINESS TO WHICH YOU WERE APPOINTED?”

plain English, not the legalese your attorney or staff planners insist upon for formal commission action. For example, in addition to referring to ordinances or motions by number or code, include a simple explanation, such as “proposal to approve building an apartment house at 123 East Main, a single family zone.” If you know there will be a crowd of citizens assembled for a particular issue, ask the staff to include in the handouts other explanatory information such as a map or fact sheet. Reader-friendly material should become routine and give the citizen a positive feeling of inclusiveness.

Next, be sensitive to sight lines and other impediments. If the staff is using visual aids such as charts, graphs, overheads

or slides, make sure that everyone in the audience can see them. Too often these are oriented only to the planning commissioners. If necessary, rearrange the chairs or the screen. If everything is fixed, invite the audience to move to the side where there is the best view. If none of this is possible, consider duplicating the visuals on handouts. The goal again is to be as inclusive as possible. An audience that can follow the procedures is less likely to disrupt them.

If you are the chair of the meeting, remember to continually paraphrase what is going on or being said. This not only keeps the commissioners on track, but is invaluable to members of the public.

The welcoming environment is reinforced if you treat everyone courteously, no matter how provoked you may be by hostile or uninformed remarks. We have all attended public meetings — for planning or other purposes — where a disgruntled or unhappy citizen has been insulted or maligned by representatives of the public body holding the meeting. Avoid this at all times. You may disagree with what is being said but you must show respect to the person who says it.

Another important indication of a respectful and courteous attitude toward the public is to schedule controversial matters first, or near the top of the agenda, not last, when citizens are worn out and grumpy about having to sit through hours of discussion on other matters that do not interest them. It is perfectly all right to limit discussion, but keep the ground rules simple and announce them at the beginning, repeating as often as necessary. Never change the procedure in mid-stream. For your own sanity, and as a means of giving citizens their due, try to schedule only one controversial issue a meeting.

When you want to settle particularly thorny difficulties with citizens, ask staff to set up a less formal structure such as

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“Growing” Volunteers

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members bring to the process and the outcome of any planning endeavor.

Commissions and boards numerically make up a very small percentage of the people in a community, yet they make decisions and recommendations that affect everyone. Strong and successful communities provide opportunities to increase and nurture the number and caliber of people involved. The key question is how do you use volunteers wisely? How do you prevent or alleviate burnout, create appropriate niches, increase their effectiveness, and be able to say your community was proudly served by itself?

should be other committees engaged in research work, surveys, and so on — work that needs to be done. Planning boards cannot do it all. Your planning commission should keep a list of projects on which you could use additional help, and make it available to others, including elected officials and community leaders. *Tips...*, p. 5

It has been my experience that people will help if asked. Volunteers do not need to be interested in becoming future planning commissioners. In fact, some might not have the qualifications to serve in the position you do. But that doesn't mean they can't provide useful assistance. When asking for help, however, limit your expectations to what can realistically be expected. Perhaps one day of giving a field walk around their neighborhood to those working on developing a plan for that part of the community. Or perhaps someone loves genealogical research; their skills might be transferable to historical research or data collection.

Ad hoc committees are valuable as training grounds for strong community volunteers. Make a habit of asking new or different people to help on something short-term before they are asked to sit on a commission or board for a multi-year term. Some of today's most valued community leaders were once those “new faces” who were just waiting to be asked.

Find out a person's full-range of interests — not just what they do for a living. A volunteer in one community where I worked suffered terrible burnout and swore she would never get involved in her community again because she had participated on a committee in her field of professional expertise. So she felt like she was working day and night! The key would have been to use her strong organizational skills in a different volunteer setting.

2. TRAIN VOLUNTEERS.

Whether a person is going to sit on an ad hoc committee, or on an established commission or board, it can take months to become well-versed in the ordinances, regulations, plans or circumstances that you have asked them to review, administer or develop. Don't make assumptions about your volunteers' level of knowledge. Pro-

Editor's Note Volunteers: Young & Old

If your planning commission is thinking about increased utilization of volunteers, think about working with your local high school and with your area's “RSVP” (Retired Seniors Volunteer Program) coordinator. Supervised high school students can help distribute and tally surveys, gather information, and conduct interviews — to name a few possibilities. They may be especially helpful if you are working on an update to your municipal plan — and while they are helping you, you will be helping them become more active and involved in their community.

The RSVP program can help you find retired individuals willing to volunteer their talents. RSVP volunteers in Bay County, Florida, for example, recently surveyed passengers on twelve paratransit routes, obtaining important information for the County's transit development plan. Information on the RSVP program is available by calling Bill Barrett at: 202-606-5108.

Of course, don't forget those between high school and retirement. Over twenty states have offices that can help communities set up volunteer programs. There are also consultants (such as Susan Ellis — see her sidebar, “Tips on Planning for Volunteers”) who specialize in helping develop volunteer programs. There's no reason planning commissions shouldn't tap into the excellent resource volunteers can be.

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Having spent a number of years in counties and small towns — where creative use of volunteers is essential to stretch limited resources — I have found some simple, but highly effective, ways to encourage and enhance the use of volunteers.

1. INCREASE YOUR VOLUNTEER POOL.

We have all lived in communities where most of the work is done by the few mainstays of the community. They sit on all the committees, and seem always willing to help. When they finally leave, either because of burnout, retirement or relocation, the community finds it has lost much of its “institutional memory.” Assuring continuity is one important reason to involve more people in local planning.

Although most planning commissions are appointed by the elected body, there

vide materials that help new volunteers learn more quickly: checklists, summaries, and training/orientation materials. A well-organized three-ring binder, stocked with useful information, can work remarkably well.

One good method of adapting new volunteers is to pair them off with established members so there is someone for them to ask or learn from without their having to take up an entire meeting asking basic questions. Even more importantly, this ensures that new members do not feel disenfranchised from the decision making they are supposed to be a part of.

3. MAKE YOUR ENEMIES YOUR FRIENDS.

This is perhaps the most rewarding but difficult adage to aspire to in creatively using volunteers. There always seem to be several members of the community who are distrustful, or interested in derailing a project or process most of the community wants. Take them off the sidelines and involve them. This is difficult. It requires patience and creativity on the part of the chair and other committee members. Many will fear that involving "critics" will make it even easier for them to derail a project. But, by choosing their task or assignment carefully, you may get a wealth of information and bring much more diversity into your planning process. If you choose just to ignore the naysayers, you may actually be strengthening their hand.

4. SAY "THANK YOU."

I know this sounds mundane, but I cannot stress it more emphatically as a way to keep good people involved and committed. Make sure committees, elected officials, ad hoc committees, and boards all take time out to somehow, some way, say "thank you." Who should be thanking whom? Who cares! The point is we all thrive on appreciation. The more creative and the more often it is given, the better. If you wait for the "appropriate" body or person to come forth to do this you may be waiting a very long time.

I once surprised a commission with a party instead of the assumed work session for absolutely no reason but to say thank

you. The mileage of good will and good feeling from that small gesture was immeasurable. Once a year send thank you notes to each of the members of your committee or commission, even if their term is not up. They will stay energized and willing to do other projects if they know they are appreciated while they are serving, not after they have finished or left the board.

There are lots of other ways to motivate, keep, and "grow" new volunteers. Just remember that most every member of your community has something to give back. It is up to us to figure out how it can be used wisely. Protect and nurture your volunteer resource — it makes a community what it is and what it will be.

"...BY CHOOSING THEIR TASK OR ASSIGNMENT CAREFULLY, YOU MAY GET A WEALTH OF INFORMATION AND BRING MUCH MORE DIVERSITY INTO YOUR PLANNING PROCESS."

Eileen Hennessy is a consultant in environmental planning, community affairs, and conservation issues based in Stokes County, North Carolina, near Winston-Salem. Eileen has considerable experience working with town and county planning boards, having served as planning and community development director for the Town of Pelham, New Hampshire and Stokes County, North Carolina, as a city planner for Seneca, South Carolina, and as a planner working with towns and regional planning commissions across Vermont.

[Editor's Note: Has your community made use of volunteers in a way not touched on by Eileen Hennessy? Or do you have some other point about the use of volunteers you'd like to add? Please take a few minutes to write us a note that they can be shared with other readers].

Tips on Planning for Volunteers

by Susan J. Ellis

The best way to involve volunteers is to plan in advance just as for new employees. Determine exactly what job descriptions volunteers can fill, and then be proactive in recruiting to fill those positions.

Consider the following questions:

- What would we like to do more of, if we had the extra help?
- What might we like to not have to do ourselves, if someone else liked doing it?
- What might we do a bit differently or to a targeted audience (in Spanish, in sign language), if someone with the necessary skills were available?

The best volunteer assignments are those that have clear goals, visibly accomplish something, and can be done in discrete time periods — say, three hours at a time.

Recruitment is easiest if volunteer job descriptions are product oriented rather than schedule oriented. This means asking people to commit to finishing a project by a certain dead-line, rather than having to appear on site every Tuesday morning. On the other hand, knowing in advance that you need coverage of the reception desk during staff meetings allows you to do active recruitment for volunteers available, say, every Friday from 2:00 to 4:00.

*Susan J. Ellis is President of ENERGIZE, Inc., a consulting, training, and publishing firm specializing in "volunteerism." She is also author, with Katherine Noyes, of *By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers* (Jossey-Bass 1990). For a free catalog of books and videos on volunteer management, call Susan at: 800-395-9800, or write to her at: ENERGIZE, 5450 Wissahickon Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19144.*

Sharing the Map:

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN CONCEPT PLANNING

by Robert L. Potter & Evelyn F. Swimmer

The concept plan is an old and reliable tool of landscape architects and planners. It is basically a site map with key areas identified showing spatial relationships of proposed land uses and circulation patterns. Its chief purpose is to graphically communicate concepts to people who are involved in one way or another in the planning process.

The concept plan is normally prepared by a professional and then presented to the community for discussion. Our experience has indicated that there is another way to do this. By asking local citizens to share their ideas during the creation of these plans, a more productive two-way communication is established between professionals and participants. Instead of reacting to the plan, the community pro-actively creates the plan. The results are more meaningful to the community. Most importantly, people will support their own ideas.

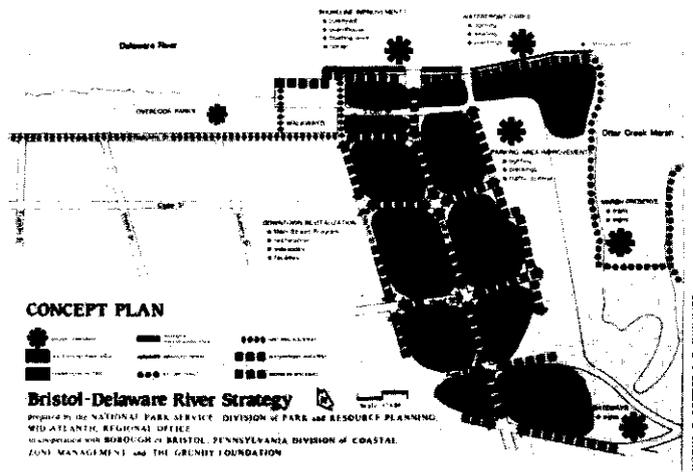
THE BRISTOL EXAMPLE

Recently, we were asked to facilitate a community revitalization and waterfront improvement project in Bristol, Pennsylvania, on the banks of the Delaware River. Bristol is an older city, with a population of about 10,000, just north of Philadelphia. We immediately set out to get as many local residents involved as we could. We met with the Borough Council, the mayor and other community and business leaders. A project task force was established, and a town meeting called. Over 250 people attended, including representatives from all of the major community organizations.

It became clear to us that a concept plan would be needed to graphically portray the community's vision. In keeping with our commitment to include strong



Main Street in Bristol connects with the waterfront. A key goal was to draw people from the downtown to the waterfront, and vice-versa.



The concept plan that emerged following the workshops. Note the "walkways" linking the downtown and waterfront areas.

public participation we arranged a "vision" workshop.

THE WORKSHOP

More than sixty citizens, including community leaders and task force members, turned out for a full day of activities. The workshop was structured so that the morning consisted of guest speakers and presentations, and the afternoon involved a hands-on mapping exercise.

Speakers discussed their similar projects in waterfront planning, trail systems, Main Street programs and the like. Learning about the successes of other communities is often both informative and encouraging.

THE MAPPING EXERCISE

For the mapping exercise, we divided the group into four smaller working groups. Symbols were provided for each group out of various colored papers representing elements on the action list, such as: commercial sites, wildlife areas, boat facilities, trails, recreation areas, historic sites, parking areas, street lighting, and signs.

Each group gathered around a table with a large map. We then instructed the groups to arrange their symbols on the map in ways that would make sense to them and meet their community's goals. They were encouraged to be imaginative and to try out new ideas.

The groups were given about two hours to work. We, as facilitators, then stepped back to see what would happen. People showed no reticence; they dove into the work with great enthusiasm. At the end of two hours each group selected "reporters" to present their work.

THE RESULTS

The resulting maps were illuminating. Each group had thoughtfully organized its colored symbols into a concrete vision of the future. Trail systems rimmed a future nature preserve and continued along sidewalks through the historic district; boat ramps, boat piers, bulkheads, rip-rap, fishing sites and other waterfront access points were seriously considered and placed appropriately as part of a shoreline improvement strategy; a city "gateway," parking



Reader Response

areas and traffic patterns were sited to achieve both beauty and efficiency; park facilities were enhanced and expanded with plantings, seating and lighting.

We did not attempt to synthesize the four maps into one at the workshop. It was enough to have everyone feel good about their contributions. Later, the task force deliberated and merged the concepts.

Although the mapping exercise was only one part of the overall Bristol project, it was a time of decision-making. It was a time when communication flowed easily and productively among citizens and community leaders. As the remainder of the project unfolded and culminated in a final town meeting, the task force, the planning commission and the borough council had confidence in the existence of a consensus. This consensus would support them as they implemented the plan. Everyone knew the plan was created by the citizens themselves, not by professionals or community leaders alone.

Communities will meet the challenge of designing their towns if provided some guidance and facilitation. The use of workshops can be enjoyable, as well as productive, for the participants. They bring solutions that are responsive to needs and produce results that can be embraced by everyone.

Both Evelyn Swimmer and Robert Potter work for the Mid-Atlantic Regional Office of the National Park Service, Evelyn as a landscape architect and Robert as a planner. Evelyn and Robert have co-authored (along with several other individuals) the Riverwork Book, an excellent manual on how local communities can develop effective strategies for protecting their river-related resources. The Riverwork Book was prepared under the National Park Service's Rivers & Trails Conservation Assistance Program, and is available at no charge by writing to Evelyn or Robert c/o NPS-MARO, Customs House - Room. 251, 2nd & Chestnut, Philadelphia, PA 19106.

[Editor's Note: Elaine Cogan's column in our last issue on dealing with the media led to two responses. The first, by Garry Fairbairn, is printed below. The second, from Dan Hamilton, can be found on the back cover as this issue's "Insights" column. Elaine Cogan's brief reply follows Mr. Fairbairn's comments. If you have anything to add to this "dialogue," please let us know. It is an important topic, and one on which we can learn from each others' experiences].

I read Elaine Cogan's article, and take exception to the following statement: "With the exception of public television and radio, all media are businesses whose owners expect them to make a profit. Self-serving declarations to the contrary, their primary mission is not to carry your message except as it gets them more readers, listeners, or viewers."

The need to make a profit does constrain available space. But the goal of most newspapers is to make a profit by performing a needed public service. The statement above is more suited to supermarket tabloids. Perhaps most important is the fact that these allegedly profit-obsessed publishers do not personally write and edit news copy. They hire journalists for that. As a general rule, journalists do their best, within space and budget limits, to provide the public with what in their best judgment is the important news of the day.

If public officials believe the quoted statement, they will do themselves and their citizens a disservice, because the statement implies there is little hope of getting newspaper space unless the story is sensational. On the contrary, I think the large majority of journalists will be sympathetic to giving coverage to any topic where a public official clearly and honestly communicates why that topic is important to ordinary people.

Few officials try to do this — they are usually too wrapped up in bureaucratic processes. They will issue news releases, for example, about how the multi-county water quality review task force has successfully completed phase three of a comprehensive public consultation process (yawn), instead of saying that civic officials are trying to find ways to keep your water safe to drink.

Garry Fairbairn is editor of The Western Producer, a 110,000-circulation newspaper for western Canadian farm families, and served 11 years with the Canadian Press wire service, including a posting as correspondent in Washington, D.C.

Elaine Cogan Replies:

The writers of these letters [Garry Fairbairn and Dan Hamilton] seem to assume that my accurate depiction of the media as a "business" somehow denigrates their roles as purveyors of information to the public. I do not believe this is so. To the contrary, the need to make a profit gives them a sharper and perhaps more critical focus on what may be newsworthy. This may not trickle down to reporters, but it is the editors who make the print/no print decisions. This does not have to result in slanted or biased coverage. We who are in the business of trying to interest the media in covering our events or activities need to work with them on their terms. The best advice is still to know what that requires in each of our communities.



Braintree's Build-out Analysis

GIS can also be used to conduct a "build-out" analysis. For example, the Town of Braintree, Vermont, recently wanted to examine the potential impact of development based on its current plan and ordinances, taking into account various environmental and other constraints. The basic process for the build-out analysis was organized into the following steps: (1) A town-wide GIS layer was created to reflect the currently allowed density of development (for example, 1 acre, 5 acre and 10 acre lots); (2) "Development exclusion" and "development discouragement" GIS layers were prepared; the exclusion layer, for example, included floodplains and land with slopes steeper than 25%; (3) The GIS layers were combined in an overlay in order to identify the developable portions of the town; (4) Calculations were prepared indicating the total number of parcels "available" for development, their median size, and their mean distance from town roads; and (5) Alternative scenarios were prepared, adjusting development densities in different parts of town. The GIS analysis gave Braintree residents a valuable tool for look-

ing at the potential effects of development, as well as a means of seeing how changes in their own local regulations could affect the development potential of their town.

[Editor's Note: Randall Arendt also discussed the value of conducting a build-out analysis in his article "Open Space Zoning" in our July/August 1992 issue, at page 6].

Computer Mapping versus GIS



While all geographic information systems include a computer mapping component, not all computer mapping systems are geographic information systems. The key distinction is that GIS integrates computer mapping with a database management system, allowing for detailed spatial analysis. In contrast, most computer or automated mapping systems are designed for map design and production, and not for spatial analysis (some uses of spatial analysis in planning are described later in this article). Automated mapping systems have more tools for designing visually attractive maps with a wide selection of map presentation formats and symbols, but have fewer tools for measurement and modeling.

Resources:



The best introductory text on GIS is *Geographic Information Systems: An Introduction*, by Jeffrey Star and John Estes (Prentice Hall 1990). If you would like more detailed information about any of the projects described in the article, contact Tom Millette at: (413) 566-5552.

Welcoming The Public

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around a table in a conference room, or even the lunchroom. You will be pleasantly relieved to find how tensions lessen when strong-minded people can relate eye-to-eye. You may have to "agree to disagree," but you are more likely to be friends afterwards. If the formidable dais/distance from the public environment cannot be altered or replaced, try harder. Lean forward attentively when the public speaks, listen intently, refer to individuals by name, and shorten the perception of distance between you and the citizen every way you can.

Unfortunately, the environment least conducive to constructive give-and-take with the public is probably the one you use now. Level with the audience as much as you can and they most often will level with you.

Elaine Cogan is a partner with the firm of Cogan Sharpe Cogan, Planning and Communications Consultants, Portland, Oregon. Her column appears in each issue of the *Planning Commissioners Journal*. Among the topics Elaine will be discussing in future columns are:



- The politics of being an effective commissioner.
- How to chair a meeting effectively, and how to best participate if you are not the chair.
- Dealing with difficult people at public meetings.
- How to make written materials clear and comprehensible to the public.

Thomas L. Millette, Ph.D. was just appointed Director of the Geoprocessing Laboratory and Program at Mt. Holyoke College in Massachusetts.



Previously, he served as Director of the Laboratory for Spatial Analysis in the Department of Geography, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Maryland. Tom has worked with numerous state and regional planning agencies in setting up GIS programs. He wishes to thank Sara Moulton of the Montpelier Planning Department, Jonathan Croft of the Central Vermont Regional Commission, and Eric Edelstein of the Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Regional Commission for their generous assistance and the use of their graphics for this article.