



Georgia Planning Officials Newsletter

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Decision Making on the Commission

Excerpted from *The Job of the Planning Commissioner*
By: Albert Solnit

More often than not, a group of average people meeting to make a decision on something will bog down in confusion, aimless bickering, and misunderstanding. Much of the time communication will break down completely and finally all hope of progress on the work at hand dies. Planning commissions fall into this trap. It's necessary to understand a little about the do's and don'ts of working together as a group before a commission can expect to be successful with the work itself.

Once the internal structure of a commission is in place, it should be able to reach decisions effectively. Most believe that decisions should always be reached by polling the members under majority-rules voting procedures. This is the model, but it does have some pitfalls that should be avoided. One is a feeling by members on the short end of the vote that there wasn't enough time for them to get their point of view across – that the majority votes were there and their views were just a waste of time. This breeds resentment and often withdrawal from discussions. An advanced

stage of this problem is the creation of permanent factions in a win-lose competition with each other, especially if there's a swing vote to be won. In majority-rules decision making, the minority must be made to feel that they have been given fair treatment and that their views are respected and could be part of a majority opinion next time. No one wants to be on a commission where he or she is permanently relegated to the losing side on every vote.

Some groups take the extra time to reach a consensus. In this method, communication is carried on in a supportive climate so that everyone feels he or she has had a fair chance to affect the decision. Then the chairperson will call for a test motion reflecting the "sense of the discussion" and lay it open to more discussion and amending. A consensus is not unanimity, but a psychological state where those not in full agreement are able to go along with the decision because they feel that their alternative has been understood and that they have been given sufficient opportunity to sway the others to their position. Some poorer methods of decision making abound. The most common are:

SCATTERBRAINSTORMING

Every time someone offers an idea, someone else offers another before the first one is discussed. The result is nonsupport of an idea by bypassing it until the group finds one it likes. It leaves the proposer with the feeling of having put a half-dead fish on the table – to wriggle and die while others ignore it. This lack of simple courtesy soon kills the initiative of more reticent members.

LOOKING TO AUTHORITY

Many groups make decisions in response to an authority figure. Some commissions blindly follow the lead of the planner. Sometimes they are set up to let the chairperson or the ex officio member from the city council tell them what the right decision will be. While this is efficient, it requires too little involvement for any real commitment to the decision to take place.

RAILROADING

Often there is a clique on the commission who can force decisions without the real consent of the majority. They come up with a motion before anyone can discuss the issues and ram it through. The chairperson is usually instrumental in railroading decisions through, using such ploys as "It's late and we've heard all the facts on this, so let's vote and move on" or "Most of us know how we want to move on this," assuming the intimidated silence of some commissioners to mean consent. Such cabals leave other members – often a majority – feeling alienated and resentful. Eventually a revolt may take place when the majority learns that they've been manipulated by a minority.

With some of these roadblocks and common pitfalls in mind, the successful commission can navigate situations that could lead to conflict in a more efficient way.

Upcoming Events

Southface Sustainable Roundtable
September 5, 2008—Atlanta, GA

Confronting Atlanta's Sprawl

For more information visit www.southface.org

Community Planning Academy: Training for Planning Officials
September 10, October 9 and November 12, 2008—Atlanta, GA

The objective of this 3-day workshop is to equip citizen planners and community leaders with the technical knowledge and leadership skills necessary to successfully plan vibrant communities.

For more information call **(404) 463-3211**

Certified Commissioners Advanced Program Training
September 10-12, 2008—Athens, GA

For more information visit www.accg.org

Georgia Planning Association Fall Conference
October 1-3, 2008—Augusta, GA

Planning Officials Track

For more information visit www.georgiaplanning.org

We want to hear from you! Please send us your thoughts, experiences and advice on being a planning official.
Email or fax your submissions to Stephen Causby at scausby@atlantaregional.com or 404.463.3105