

MEETING RULES FOR PLANNING COMMISSIONERS

Adapted from material produced by the Michigan Chapter of the American Planning Assoc.

As the new year is upon us and we consider the past year and our responsibilities, be they job-related or not, we look for ways to better prepare ourselves for the year ahead and what challenges may come our way. As a planning commission member, training can be hard to find, expensive or difficult to schedule. This month's newsletter gives a few quick tips on how we can be more effective in making planning decisions in our communities by conducting meetings carefully. For more information on this and other topics relevant to the planning commission, see the Planning Commissioners Journal at www.plannersweb.com.

Here are some rules that the planning commission may find helpful.

- **All comments should be directed through the chair.**
Just as the audience must be recognized by the chair, so too should the commissioners. Not only does this respect the role of the chair it also sets a precedent for the audience to follow.
- **All deliberations should be in the open.**
This goes beyond the strict requirements of the Open Meetings Act. It is important that the audience view your commission as an open, fair, and deliberative body. Remember, some people are suspicious of government; don't add substance to that perception.
- **Do not hold private conferences prior to meeting.**
Don't meet as a group in a small room or other place outside the chamber in which your meeting is held. When arriving at the meeting, stay in the chamber. While socializing is acceptable, make sure that the audience doesn't perceive that you are informally meeting to decide an issue or trying to unduly influence one another. Do not talk quietly with your commission neighbor during the meeting. Make all of your comments aloud during the deliberations. If you have a question, ask the applicant or the chair, rather than your neighbor.
- **Express your opinions.**
Don't simply vote without letting everyone know why you are voting, whether for or against the issue. Your comments may help others to decide (or change their vote). It also helps the applicant and the audience better understand the strengths or weaknesses of the proposal.
- **Conformance with ordinance standards should be the focus of all deliberations.**
The discussion should proceed long enough for someone to feel confident in proposing a complete motion that embodies most of the important findings.

Following a logical decision-making process is one of the most effective ways to avoid challenges to decisions. Careful consideration and support of decisions through the use of the standards in the zoning ordinance is important. If a decision is challenged, the importance of using the ordinance's standards becomes clear. A well-supported decision provides the background needed to build a solid legal foundation for the decision.

Remember, it is not enough to deny an application because of a vague notion that the use is not a "good idea", or that it will "harm the neighborhood". The record must show sufficient facts to back up the findings made according to the ordinance standards. If traffic is a concern, describe those concerns as precisely and factually as possible.

By following these guidelines and others your commission may have in place, meetings may run more smoothly and the relationship between commissioner and applicant might be maintained as respectful.

Upcoming Events

ACCG Commissioners Training Program

January 15, 2010—Macon, GA

For more information visit www.accg.org

Safe, Healthy and Strong Cities:

The Promise of Afterschool Programs

January 22, 2010—Atlanta, GA

For more information visit www.gmanet.com

ACCG Legislative Conference

February 8-9, 2010—Atlanta, GA

For more information visit www.accg.org

Community Planning Academy:

Ethics in Planning

February 18, 2010—Atlanta, GA

For more information visit

www.atlantaregional.com/cpa

