



Georgia Planning Officials Newsletter

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SIX THINGS I WISH I HAD KNOWN WHEN I FIRST BECAME A PLANNING COMMISSIONER

By Philip H. Klotz, AICP (Adapted from *The Commissioner*)

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 solicitor 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."
- 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 municipal engineer or an 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.
- 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.

Upcoming Events

Community Planning Academy:

ArcGIS Desktop II

March 4-6, 2009—Atlanta, GA

For more information visit

www.atlantaregional.com/communityplanningacademy

The Greening of Urban Design

March 17, 2009—Atlanta, GA

For more information visit www.georgiaplanning.org

CCAP Advanced Leadership Training

March 18-20, 2009—Athens, GA

For more information visit www.accg.org

GCCMA Spring Conference

March 25-27, 2009—Athens, GA

For more information visit www.gmanet.com

Georgia Planning Association Spring Conference

March 26-27, 2009—Canton, GA

For more information visit www.georgiaplanning.org

A great resource for finding out more on Georgia's Open Meetings Laws is *Government in the Sunshine: A Guide to Georgia's Open Meetings and Open Records Laws for Municipal Officials*, produced by the Georgia Municipal Association. An online copy can be found at: <http://www.gmanet.com/Publications.aspx>.