



Georgia Planning Officials Newsletter

April 2010

LINKING ELECTED OFFICIALS AND PLANNING

Adapted from *Linking Elected Officials and Planning* (PCJ) by Mike Chandler

Elected officials serving on the local governing body 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 in the actual planning process, especially at an early stage, the commission can incorporate the governing body's perspective and concerns. This will reduce the chances of being "blind-sided" by critical comments at the end of the process.
- 4. Governing Body Member Serving on the Commission.** This strategy can produce exciting results. The first step involves a search of your enabling statutes to see if it's permissible for a member of the local governing body to also serve, with voting rights, on the planning commission. If such an appointment can be made, strong consideration should be given to exercising this option. Our experience with this approach in Blacksburg has been quite positive, especially from the perspective of communication, mutual understanding, and respect.

Upcoming Events

ACCG Annual Meeting
April 24-27, 2010—Savannah, GA
For more information visit www.accg.org

New Urbanism: Rx for Healthy Places
May 19-22, 2010—Atlanta, GA
For more information visit www.cnu.org/cnu18

GMA Annual Convention and Training
June 26-29, 2010—Savannah, GA
For more information visit www.gmanet.com

DCA Community Planning Institute
July 13-14, 2010—Helen, GA
For more information call **404-679-5279**