HOW TO BECOME THE GREAT PLANNING COMMISSIONER
Planning Commission Training
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WHERE DOES THE LEGAL AUTHORITY TO PLAN?

- Federal Constitution and laws
- State Constitution and laws
- City/County Ordinance/Charter
- General Plans
- Specific plans (if required)
- Zoning/Development code relief from zoning; use permits, variances, etc.
- Subdivision Map Act
LAND USE HIERARCHY

Long-Term

More General

More Detailed

Short-Term

GENERAL PLAN
Community Plans

Specific Plans
Zoning
(Discretionary/Legislative)

Subdivision Maps
Conditional Use Permits
Variances
(Discretionary/Quasi-Adjudicatory)

Building Permits
Grading Permits
(Ministerial)
UNDERSTAND YOUR ROLE

- Unique position
- Bring broad community perspective
- Citizen involvement
- Balance interests – not political and not purely technical
- Educate the public
- Future orientation
- Ethical and Fair
**STAFF ROLE**

- Guides and Coordinates complete review of projects
- Provides information and staff reports including professional analysis and recommendations
- Identifies relevant local policies, state & federal laws
- Interprets
- Educates
- Monitors
- Acts in a fair, ethical, & consistent manner
- Technical Policy Perspective
PREPARE WELL FOR COMMISSION MEETINGS

- Read and understand the staff report
- Visit the sites under consideration (upon advice from your legal counsel)
- Contact staff with questions in advance if you have them
- Review the applications in their local context
- If unable to attend meeting, let staff know
HAVE A BIAS FOR ACTION

- Decisions are the value you add to the planning process
- Prepare for the meeting with the intent of making a decision
- Play to your strengths and expertise
- Avoid unnecessary continuances, a burden to all interested parties
**DON’T BLINDSIDE STAFF WITH DIFFICULT QUESTIONS AT THE MEETING**

- Let staff know prior to the meeting if you have concerns so they can prepare
- Follow the protocol for contacting staff, either through the director or with the staff members directly
- Do expect good staff work and recommendations
ELEMENTS OF GOOD DECISION MAKING

- Project Review
- Due Process
- Public Hearings
- Findings
- Appeals
**PROJECT REVIEW**

Ask yourself:
- What should the community look like?
- Are there community needs that are not being met?
- How does the project relate to its surrounding environment?
- Does the proposed use enhance the community both today and in the future?

- Review and apply both written and oral testimony
- Keep the long view - iterative process
- Think about who is impacted
- Listen to what is really being said
- Remain objective
- Express yourself clearly and concisely
- Be respectful
DUE PROCESS

- Actions must be
  - Reasonable
  - Non-discriminatory
  - Not arbitrary or capricious

- “Notice & Hearing” especially for Zoning Hearings
  - Procedural rules of conduct
  - Record of all hearings
  - Public staff reports available prior to hearing

- Legislative vs. Quasi-Judicial Actions
  - Legislative actions must be reasonable and nondiscriminatory
  - Quasi-judicial decisions must be supported by substantial evidence in the record

- Informing the Public
  - Legal requirements
  - Communication tools
**FINDINGS**

- **Purpose of findings:**
  - Provide a framework for making principled decisions.
  - Facilitate orderly analysis to reduce the likelihood of random leaps from evidence to conclusions.
  - Appraise the reviewing court of the basis for the agency’s decision.

- **Explain the basis for the decision:**
  - Just because you do not like the project – this doesn’t work, need sound reasons. e.g. The project is consistent with the General Plan BECAUSE…”

- **Refer to factual evidence** (written or oral)
- **Relevant to the issue before the Commission**
- **Part of the public record**
- **Sufficient to determine whether & on what basis should judicial review be sought**
Be civil to each other so the public will be civil to you

- Your example establishes the tone for the meeting
- Be respectful
- Come prepared
- Keep track of positions you agree with
- Help Inform
- Model good listening
Seek to understand each other’s positions and opinions

- Listen carefully to what is being said
- One of your objectives should be to identify points of consensus
- Ask clarifying questions to make sure you understand what is being said
Communications key to building relationships with public

This may be the first (and/or last) meeting they will attend

Explain the process and the purpose of the meeting

Explain what can the commission do and what the commission cannot do

It will establish or reinforce their view of local government
Establish new policy or policy modification separately from individual projects

- No individual project should dictate your long range goals
- Need to look at the broader ramification in setting new policy
EXPLAIN YOUR RATIONALE, BUT DON’T LECTURE THE PUBLIC

- The public will be more accepting of broad concepts if presented in a different format and venue
- It is helpful to cite previous commission decisions
Keep the meeting tempo the same at the end as at the beginning

- Citizens who waited through earlier items deserve the same courtesy as those heard earlier
- Balance time by being cognizant of the full agenda for the evening
- Strive to be efficient
**STRIVE FOR CONSISTENCY, BUT ACKNOWLEDGE UNIQUE SITUATIONS IN PROJECTS**

- Not every decision sets precedent
- Unique circumstances may warrant unique solutions
MAKE YOUR FINAL ACTION CLEAR TO THE PUBLIC

- The public should leave the meeting clearly understanding what you did
- Motions should be clear & understandable
COMMUNICATE WITH THE CITY COUNCIL OR BOARD OF SUPERVISORS FREQUENTLY

- Develop rapport with your Council/Board member
- Joint study sessions to discuss key issues
- Send policy questions to Council/Board if needed
PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

- Who are you planning for?
- Are your community needs being met?
- Who will be residents in years to come?