

# Technical Briefs

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## Roles in Public Decision Making Related to Planning

**While planning commissioners are decision makers, they also are educators. Regrettably, community outreach, considered essential by most planning commissioners, often gets pushed to the back burner due to its time-intensive nature.**

It is unfortunate that the only time some citizens come in contact with government agencies is when they renew their driver's license, register to vote, or learn of an impending land-use decision in their back yard. Rezoning and other neighborhood land-use issues that directly touch residents present a real opportunity to educate citizens about the planning process.

While most states have minimum requirements regarding notification of applications for variances or conditional use permits, communities may opt to do more. The last thing a commission needs is a constituent who is irate because he wasn't notified. It's difficult to inform in the face of anger.

The Internet offers a wealth of opportunities to planning commissions to provide information and to educate the public. It also provides significant cost savings. No longer does the planning staff have to mail out information in response to an

inquiry. Staff now can direct residents to the appropriate webpage containing information and links that will respond to the question. Many local governments have extensive websites that contain a host of information for local consumers—residents, businesses, developers/builders, and journalists, to name a few.

Most websites contain information about the planning commission's role and responsibilities and list contact information for commissioners. The best webpages are written for the layperson and avoid excessive quotations from ordinances and bylaws. Many websites include answers to frequently asked questions. Examples of these questions include:

- Why did I receive a certified notice of a public hearing? Am I required to attend the public hearing?
- I want to speak to my district planning commissioner. How can I contact that person?

- How can I obtain a copy of the staff report for a pending land-use application?
- When and where does the planning commission hold its meetings? What time do meetings begin?
- What is the order of the scheduled agenda items?
- How do I sign up to testify at a planning commission meeting and how long may I speak?
- If I want to bring copies of my testimony with me, how many do I need?
- How do I get to the planning commission's offices?
- Will I be notified if a public hearing is postponed?
- How can I voice my opinion on an application if I am unable to attend the hearing?
- What does the planning commission do?
- How are commissioners appointed?
- How does one qualify to be a planning commission member?
- Are planning commissioners paid?

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Websites also contain commission meeting dates, agendas, supporting documentation for upcoming meetings, and links for those interested in obtaining more information. Some planning commissions use e-mail to notify interested parties about upcoming meetings. The e-mail message refers them to the website for supporting documentation.

When something happens in a neighborhood it may be the only time a citizen comes into contact with the planning commission and the encounter is almost always emotionally charged. It's imperative that people understand the process and their role in it. A well-written overview of the process and meeting procedures can help interested parties prepare their presentations. Many commissions make this information available online and review the rights and privileges of participants at the start of public hearings. Some jurisdictions allow interested parties to register online to testify or to submit written testimony.

In many cases, planning commissioners are the best source of information about their role and the role of planning within the community. Commissioners tend to be active within the community, using their appearances at community gatherings—such as street festivals, awards ceremonies, school career days, and holiday festivities—to educate the public.

Quarterly or semi-annual newsletters help commissions spread the word about their work. Some commissions use

cable television's government access channel to air commission meetings or to produce shows on specific planning topics.

Citizen planning academies have taken hold in communities across the country. Open to citizens of all ages, occupations, and interests, citizen academies have two goals—to educate citizens about planning services and programs, and to attract and train future community leaders. The underlying premise is that by demystifying the process, people will be more likely to participate and less likely to feel disenfranchised. Topics in these programs range from the basics of the comprehensive plan and zoning to neighborhood planning and how local government works. Legal issues are also covered. Many academies grew out of planning commissioner training programs, and they have enjoyed robust success with the general public.

While community planning is not yet a household word, it is becoming increasingly familiar due to the outreach efforts of commissioners. Whether done formally or more casually, planning commission education efforts are not only enhancing public knowledge but bringing more people into the planning process. ■■

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