

Behind the Scenes at a Training Session

SERVING ON A PLANNING COMMISSION or a zoning board can be daunting, even for those who come to the job with experience in related fields. All those acronyms and legal terms are truly mysterious. Planning is, after all, a field that depends on its own jargon, or “plannerese.” The learning curve is steep, with many different fields to absorb. Staff reports can be hard to figure out. Your fellow commissioners come from different professions and have their share of biases.

This all makes training a necessity. How-to sessions are a feature of most state planning conferences, and occasionally of a national conference. Several state governments have organized training sessions on their own. Some are limited to design or another field. Some are mandatory, and some have other requirements. States with open meetings acts are required to hold training sessions on the workings of a public body; Illinois requires commissioners to take online training to learn the law.

I talked to Laurie Marston, FAICP, of the Illinois Chapter of APA about a training program that she helps organize. The training program has been held at the annual Illinois APA chapter conference for the last seven years. The conference held in Springfield in late September marked the 40th anniversary of the chapter. It featured a day-long training session and a mock hearing. The other trainers were Michael Blue, FAICP; Greg Jones; and David Silverman, AICP.

Before APA Illinois started doing training, the Urban Land Institute and the University of Illinois at Chicago sponsored a joint online program for planning commissioners. “The online format was effective for professional planners who were there mostly to keep up their AICP certification,” says Marston, a former suburban community development director and long-time planning consultant. “But

we are dealing with citizens, volunteers who come from all sorts of backgrounds. We felt this type of training worked best in a face-to-face setting.”

The APA Illinois sessions are cosponsored by DePaul University’s Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development, a Chicago-based group focused on urban

planning and transportation. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, the regional planning agency for seven counties, also cosponsors training sessions for the purpose of building local government capacity.

The basics and beyond

So who should attend? “We encourage staff to invite anyone who has to do with land use,” says Marston. That includes members of the planning commission, zoning

board, preservation commission, environmental commission—“any group involved with decisions related to good planning.”

Typically the planning staff will also attend. “In one community, we were delighted to see the fire chief, director of public works, and village manager. And we have always encouraged communities to invite elected officials,” she says.

Throughout the day at the Springfield session, the presenters stressed the need to refer to the comprehensive plan at planning commission meetings and to keep it up to date. “We tell people that

they should review the plan every year,” Marston says. “Look for parts that need tweaking, especially if the community has been seriously impacted by the great recession or is facing changes due to new technology.” Years ago, she notes, the arrival of cell towers caused local officials to rethink the zoning ordinance. “In the future, it will be something else, maybe self-driving cars.”

The inevitability of change—and its effect on a local comprehensive plan—prompted many questions during the training session. “How do you know when it’s time to update?” asked one participant. Attorney Greg Jones noted that, at least in Illinois, there are no specific legal standards for changing the comprehensive plan. “It is a policy document, not a law,” he said. The danger is that the plan will languish on a shelf. And, Jones added, an out-of-date plan can cause all sorts of problems when it comes into conflict with a zoning issue.

The presenters concluded that in most cases a once-a-year workshop to review the plan is appropriate. “You can decide then if the big picture you painted is still relevant,” said Jones. When a community is still developing, once a year may not be enough. “You may spot some guidelines in the plan that just don’t make sense anymore,” Marston said.

Finally, the trainers urged that commissioners make use of their best resource, the professional planning staff. “Read everything they give you,” they said. “And make sure you understand it.”

Mock trial

The Springfield training day ended with a make-believe planning commission meeting in the village of Erewhon. The event involved all four trainers and a good part of the audience. All the roles were filled: the loopy city commissioner, the angry neighbor, the earnest city administrator. The chair (straight out of *Dr. Strangelove*) was named Merkin Muffley. The message: how not to run a meeting. ■

—Ruth Eckdish Knack, FAICP
Knack is a former executive editor of *Planning*.

TRAINING SESSION HIGHLIGHTS

Roles and responsibilities of commissioners

Findings of fact, conflict of interest, role of chair

Process and conduct of meetings

Comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance