

First on the Agenda is the Agenda!

by Elaine Cogan

Who sets the agenda for your planning board meetings? How are decisions made about the order, public comment, and other important matters? Do you allot specific times or just go with the flow? In other words, does your agenda work for you as well as it should?

If your planning board uses its agenda as a tool to efficient and productive meetings, these questions may seem elementary and even foolish. But if you are one of many whose agenda is either inadequate or even an impediment to effective meetings, it may be wise to consider how it can be improved.

The agenda is the template for your meetings. It should be developed thoughtfully so that the planning board has adequate time for matters that require attention and/or decisions and less time for “housekeeping” or more routine subjects. It should delineate plainly when public comment is invited and the actions expected of each item (review only; action; referral, etc.).

Many commissions leave the agenda writing to staff and may see it for the first time when they come to the meeting. This does not serve you or the public well. The best approach is for the chair, or a committee of your board, to review the agenda before it is final and for commissioners to receive it and any backup materials several days in advance.

Upcoming meeting agendas should also be posted in public places, such as public libraries and town or city halls. A growing number of communities also are posting agendas on their Web sites.

Other helpful procedures:

- Allow ample and early time for issues which most concern the public. Too often, planners still put them last or next to last on the agenda even though they are well aware of one or more matters certain to attract a big crowd. It is no

wonder that people get restless and cranky if they have to sit through several hours of deliberations that do not concern them. Put the contentious or controversial issues on the agenda early, and give them the time they deserve. Do not be offended if most of the crowd leaves as soon as you turn to other matters.

- Consider setting aside a general comment period where people can talk to you about any planning items that concern them. Fifteen minutes at the beginning of the agenda usually is adequate and can serve as a “safety valve” for testing the pulse of the community.

- Place together routine items that require little or no discussion on the agenda and consider them in a group. Some bodies call this the “consent agenda” and require one motion and one vote to approve them all. But be careful that they are, indeed, routine items and not anything controversial you can be accused of “sneaking through.”

- Print the allotted time for each item on the agenda...7-7:05, Roll Call; 7:05-15, Correspondence; 7:15-7:45, Major item # 1, Public Comment, etc. ... and follow the schedule as much as you can.

- Do everything possible to make the public comfortable. Print sufficient agendas for all to have one, with the aforementioned time allotments. Also, make sure there are sufficient copies of any graphics or explanatory material.

- At the start of the meeting, ask people who wish to speak on specific agenda items to sign up. This allows the chair to control the agenda and perhaps ask the board to extend the time if it is obvious the stated comment period is not sufficient for all the people who wish to be heard.

- Make sure the agenda is written in words and phrases easily understood by the public. How long did it take you, as a layperson, before you finally understood

planning jargon? Put yourself in the shoes of the citizen who is attending her first meeting. You probably need to use legal terminology when you are actually voting, but that should not preclude an explanation on the agenda that is in plain English.

- Are you expecting a turnout of non-English speaking people? Translate the agenda into one or more other languages beforehand and engage interpreters to be available at the meeting.

- Provide a simple explanation of the board's procedures on each agenda or on a separate handout. What is the purpose of a first reading? Second? Do you require simple majorities or unanimous votes? What general rules of procedure do you follow?

- Keep to your schedule, unless there are extenuating circumstances. The public and the board will be appreciative.

All planning boards and commissions have some form of agenda. By treating it seriously, you will find it is an important tool toward orderly and productive meetings. ♦

Elaine Cogan, partner in the Portland, Oregon, planning and communications firm of Cogan Owens Cogan, is a consultant to many communities undertaking strategic planning or visioning processes. Her column regularly appears in the PCJ.



Editor's Note: We received a number of thoughtful replies from our “online reviewers” concerning Elaine's article. Because we do not have the space to include this feedback here, we are posting it on our PlannersWeb site at: www.plannersweb.com/agendas.html – along with other information related to meeting agendas.



Articles of Interest

The following are just a few of the approximately 175 articles available to order and download at: www.plannersweb.com -- for fastest search, enter 3-digit article number in the search box – that will take you to excerpts from the article, information about the author, & immediate ability to order and download the article in standard pdf file format.

<p>Zoning Basics by Mike Chandler & Greg Dale</p>	<p>Mike Chandler and Greg Dale look at zoning basics with an overview of the purposes of zoning, the structure of a typical zoning ordinance, and the principal players in the “zoning universe.” With sidebars on key zoning-related legal issues.</p>	<p>article# 265 7 pages</p>
<p>Road Design -- A Turn Ahead by Ed McMahon</p>	<p>Too often new roadways have been designed to be wider and straighter, without much consideration being given to the character of the surrounding community. In recent years, however, there has been a turn towards more thoughtful, “context sensitive” design.</p>	<p>article# 227 5 pages</p>
<p>Working With Planning Consultants by Greg Dale</p>	<p>Greg Dale examines how planning departments can find and work with consultants. In part I, Dale outlines ten key elements to successfully getting started on a project that will involve consultants; in part II he examines how requests for qualifications can be used in finding planning consultants; and in part III Dale focuses on steps planning departments can take to ensure a good working relationship with planning consultants.</p>	<p>article# 328 5 pages</p>
<p>New Development, Traditional Patterns by Philip Langdon</p>	<p>A dramatic shift in the design and layout of new developments has begun to take hold in towns and cities across North America. Called “new urbanism” or “traditional neighborhood development,” this movement draws on older patterns of development to address what a growing number of planners and architects see as the failures of much post World War II housing and community design. Noted planning journalist Philip Langdon provides an introduction to new urbanism.</p>	<p>article# 305 10 pages</p>
<p>Citizen Surveys by Thomas Miller</p>	<p>A growing number of communities are augmenting traditional meetings and forums with citizen surveys. Respected surveyor Thomas I. Miller provides an introduction to the art and science of developing and using surveys.</p>	<p>article# 377 7 pages</p>
<p>On-Premise Sign Regulation by Ed McMahon</p>	<p>Too many of our streets look out on a confusing hodge-podge of signs, each trying to out-do the other to get the driver’s attention. Regulation of on-premise advertising signs is one important means by which a community can assert control over its physical environment. The end result is not just a more visually attractive environment, but one in which businesses can actually communicate more effectively to their customers.</p>	<p>article# 131 6 pages</p>

<p>Gateways: Creating Civic Identify by Suzanne Rhees</p>	<p>What impression do you get when you exit the highway and head into town? Can you tell when you're leaving one neighborhood and entering another? A look at how planning for gateways can help create and strengthen our sense of place.</p>	<p>article# 114 5 pages</p>
<p>Ten Steps in Preparing a Comprehensive Plan by Mike Chandler</p>	<p>One of the key responsibilities planning commissions have is to prepare the comprehensive plan. Mike Chandler provides an overview of the steps typically taken in developing a plan.</p>	<p>article# 135 3 pages</p>
<p>Green Infrastructure by Ed McMahon</p>	<p>Your town, city, or county undoubtedly has an infrastructure plan dealing with water, sewer, roads, and utilities -- the gray infrastructure. But has it planned as well for green infrastructure, such as trails, greenways, river corridors, and bike paths? PCJ columnist Ed McMahon discusses the growing interest in planning for systems of green space.</p>	<p>article# 372 4 pages</p>
<p>Growing Greener: Model Ordinance Provisions for Conservation Subdivision Design by Randall Arendt</p>	<p>Noted conservation planner Randall Arendt has developed a framework for subdivision review that encourages the preservation of open space and natural areas, while enhancing the market value of development. Arendt's model ordinance reverses the standard subdivision review process by focusing first on the conservation of natural areas and last on the detailed layout of house lots. Sidebars explore key aspects of the model ordinance.</p>	<p>article# 155 8 pages</p>
<p>An Introduction to Design Guidelines by Ilene Watson</p>	<p>A growing number of cities and towns are using design guidelines to help preserve or reinforce the distinctive architectural character of certain areas or districts. Planner Ilene Watson explains what design guidelines are and how they can be used.</p>	<p>article# 157 5 pages</p>
<p>Have It Your Way: Fast-Food Restaurant Design by Ed McMahon</p>	<p>Almost everywhere we go, stand identically designed fast-food restaurants. A look at how communities can gain control over fast-food franchise design and see that it fits the character of the community. Including a tour of cities and towns that have done so.</p>	<p>article# 286 6 pages</p>
<p>Two Perspectives on Sprawl:</p>	<p>Bringing Sprawl to a Crawl, by Eben Fodor. Six steps individuals and communities can take to combat sprawl. The Anti-Sprawl Mantra, by Wayne Lemmon. The case for low-density suburban development.</p>	<p>article# 205 4 pages</p>
<p>Diagnosing Your Community Before You Plan by Joel Russell</p>	<p>Too frequently communities plunge into an exhaustive comprehensive planning process without first completing a much quicker "diagnostic study." Attorney and planner Joel Russell explores what's involved in doing a diagnostic study, and how it can better focus a community's long-range planning efforts.</p>	<p>article# 368 4 pages</p>