

Being an Effective Planning Commission

Because of its status as an advisory body, the role of the planning commission is often not well understood by citizens, others in local government or even the commissioners themselves. This frequently leads to isolation or marginalization of the commission. The dangers of this were discussed in the previous section, as was the important role of the elected body in carving out a place for the commission in the decision-making process. What can the commission do for itself to ensure relevance and effectiveness? Several good tips come from Solnit's *The Job of the Planning Commissioner*¹ and *The Citizen's Guide to Planning*² by Herbert Smith:

- Take time to orient new commissioners to the job.
- Be an effective body. Annually reexamine the work you are doing and the way you are doing it. Make sure your procedures are efficient and you function effectively as a group.
- Work with the elected body to develop an annual work program for active planning (such as policy development responsibilities). Provide justifications, from your experiences, for the items on the work program.
- Don't mistake development review (reactive planning) for active planning.
- Work with the citizens. Consider holding a public forum annually. Ask citizens how things are going and what, if anything, they would like to see done.
- Attend educational programs to learn about best practices in planning and keep up to date on land use law.
- Don't allow the commission to become a rubber stamp for actions requested by the elected body. The role of the commission should be to study, question, recommend and even criticize when necessary.
- Dispel the notion that the commission is merely providing laymen's opinions. "Planning" that is nothing more than collective thinking will be disregarded. Commit the time and effort necessary to study issues, ask questions and find answers; in short, be prepared for the task at hand.

¹Solnit, Albert. 1987. *The Job of the Planning Commissioner*. Chicago: American Planning Association.

²Smith, Herbert H. 1993. *The Citizens Guide to Planning*. Chicago: American Planning Association.

