

Congratulations: You're Our Newest Plan Commissioner.

So Now What Do You Do?

By Charles Eckenstahler and Craig Hullinger

Introduction

Being appointed to a Plan Commission is an honor very few residents of a community ever receive. Where else can you serve your community where you need to have the wisdom of a seasoned judge, the patience of a saint, familiarity with the legalities of land use law, and a personal sense of doing what is right for the common good?

Serving on a Plan Commission is not easy but it can be one of the most rewarding experiences of a person's life. This article summarizes the basic functions of the Plan Commission and the everyday responsibilities of the Plan Commissioner. Duties Of The Plan Commission A Plan Commission, under Illinois law, is primarily an advisory body to the city council, village board of trustees or county board of commissioners.

The jobs assigned to the Plan Commission are rather few, but significant:

- to gather public input and recommend to the legislative body the adoption of a comprehensive Plan for the municipality;
- to gather public input and recommend to the legislative body the adoption of a Zoning Ordinance for the municipality;

- to review and/or approve new development - more specifically site development plans for specific projects; and
- to review and/or approve plats of subdivision.

In many areas of Illinois, planning and zoning programs have a long history. In others, communities are just beginning to develop a comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance. Whether you have been appointed to a new or seasoned Plan Commission, it will involve the same procedures and require a considerable amount of research and preparation.

In Illinois, the Plan Commission prepares the Comprehensive Plan, holds the required public hearings and makes a recommendation to the legislative body regarding its adoption. The zoning ordinance follows a similar process, where the Plan Commission oversees the preparation of the ordinance, holds the required public hearing and recommends its adoption.

Once these documents are adopted, the Plan Commission assumes the duty of reviewing development proposals, development site plans and plats of subdivided land. Typically, the review is designed to assure that the proposed development is completed according to regulations and development standards established by the community. The Plan Commission may also decide whether or not certain types of development will be allowed as special uses or planned developments according to specific provisions of the zoning ordinance.

The Plan Commission also functions as the “think-tank” and “community sounding board.” It provides a mechanism to publically introduce new ideas and concepts for a better community for evaluation, approval and implementation by the legislative body. Most often it is an individual

commissioner, who researches the idea, presents the idea to the public for comment and then molds the idea into a specific plan for implementation. This process is not for the faint of heart since Plan Commissioners, even when provided professional staff, spend a large amount of personal time in order to be fully informed concerning decisions they will be recommending.

Responsibilities Of A Plan Commissioner Preparation of the Comprehensive Plan (or its amendment), zoning decisions and development review are significant responsibilities for which the lay commissioner must prepare him or herself. The process for becoming an effective Plan Commissioner is not found in any study course but is typically learned “on the job,” in six easy (or not so easy) lessons.

Lesson #1 - Attendance At Every Meeting This is probably the most important lesson. The Plan Commission represents a cross section of the community and each member’s viewpoint is important to the decision making process. When a Commissioner is absent, this portion of the community viewpoint may not be fully represented and the other Commissioners are not provided the valuable insights of the Commissioner. Much of the process of planning and zoning is learned “on the job” and faithful attendance allows the Commissioner to “learn the ropes” more quickly.

Lesson #2 - Study The Plan And Ordinance This is an obvious statement, but one often ignored. Every Commissioner should have an understanding of the major development goals, policies and objectives detailed in the Comprehensive Plan. He/she should have a casual working knowledge of the provisions of the zoning ordinance. Detailed and specific knowledge is not a prerequisite, but the ability to find information within the comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance is necessary to evaluate development proposals and make recommendations. It’s obvious some amount of home work is required to gain a casual working knowledge of the documents.

Lesson #3 - Meeting Preparation It is especially helpful for Commissioners to review those portions of the comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance which have a bearing on the issues being discussed at the meeting.

Therefore, Commissioners should read the agenda and any supporting documentation to familiarize themselves with the specific issues to be considered prior to the meeting. Some Commissioners actually write out specific questions they want answered prior to the meeting. This personal preparation time makes the meeting proceed smoothly and efficiently and prevents endlessly long drawn-out meetings where little seems to be accomplished.

Lesson #4 - Tour the Community And Visit The Site Good Plan

Commissioners routinely tour the community in order to be familiar with every portion of the community. This helps with the understanding of an applicant's request and determining the impact of a recommendation made by the Plan Commission. Even if the Commissioner knows the neighborhood, it's good practice to visit the site of any issue pending before the Plan Commission. It's important to personally observe the current conditions of the site and the surrounding land uses. This provides an opportunity to personally evaluate and understand what changes a decision will have on the site and its surroundings. It allows the Commissioner to personally view critical site factors which site plans, aerial photograph and other information, provided by the developer and staff, may not show.

Lesson #5 - Prepare Questions And Personal Opinions While "home work"

is important, Commissioners should not hastily form final opinions and recommendations before the meeting. Testimony from the applicant, staff reports, comments from the public and comments from fellow Commissioners should be taken into account in forming personal opinions and recommendations. It is important for Commissioners to "speak out" and ask questions to clarify issues. It's the duty of each Commissioner to express an informed opinion and respond to specific inquiries by fellow

Commissioners. Many times the deliberations and public hearing procedures have a way of raising the “blood pressure” of participants. Plan Commissioners must remember to treat these situations with understanding, tact and courtesy. Remember reasonable people can, and do, disagree which leads to a fair and open-minded evaluation of the facts surrounding the issue and the issuance of a decision by the Plan Commission which represents the best situation for the community.

Lesson #6 - Training, Training and More Training The one certainty in the planning and zoning process is change. As a result, each Commissioner should be committed to a long-ranged program of continual education. There are a number of excellent publications which can be reviewed. Additionally, universities and planning and zoning professional organizations sponsor seminars which can be attended for education and training. Summary Illinois planning and zoning laws leave final land use decisions in the hands of local citizens. The quality of the decisions and the professionalism of the procedures used to arrive at the decisions are entirely in the hands of the Plan Commissioners themselves. The personal investment of time to become fully knowledgeable about the planning and zoning process and local administrative procedures has a direct relationship to the level of personal satisfaction realized by each Commissioner. What is more important, the better Commissioners understand the duties required of them, the better the quality of the decision the Plan Commission, as a whole, will make. Better decisions will directly influence the quality of the community today and into the future.

About the authors

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