

# Some Parting Thoughts

by Elaine Cogan

It was in 1991 that *Planning Commissioners Journal* editor and publisher, Wayne Senville, first approached me about writing a column for this fledgling publication. We soon agreed it would be on the general topic of “communications,” skills and techniques planning board members can consider to do their jobs more effectively.

Since then, it has been a joyous time for me to try to delve into the many non-technical issues unpaid, often unheralded commissioners face all over the country. Now, after 19 years, we have agreed this will be my final column in the *PCJ*. As such, it seems appropriate to comment one last time on the key themes that have resonated most over time.

*Treat everyone with respect.* This seemingly obvious maxim may not always be easy to carry out. Controversy is a natural part of planning. More than most local bodies, planning board members and

their staffs deal with issues that affect people’s everyday lives. You seldom have the choice of whether to deal with controversial matters, but you can choose how to deal with them.

When members of the public give testimony or otherwise express their opinions, it is important to model the behavior you expect from others. There are many ways to keep a group of partisans from becoming an angry crowd, and your willingness to listen politely and insist on like behavior are vital. This is important also in your relations with the other commissioners. Engender cordial dialogue, understanding that sometimes you may have to agree to disagree.

*Be prepared.* Come to every board meeting after having reviewed the agenda and accompanying material carefully. Make notes of issues or questions you want to raise but be careful not to monopolize the conversation. If staff per-

sists in overwhelming you and the others with too much technical jargon, insist they give you information, orally and in writing, in plain English.

*Reach out.* Look around at the people who usually attend your meetings. They probably can be divided into two categories: the few civic-minded ones who come all or most of the time and zealous proponents or opponents of a project or point of view.

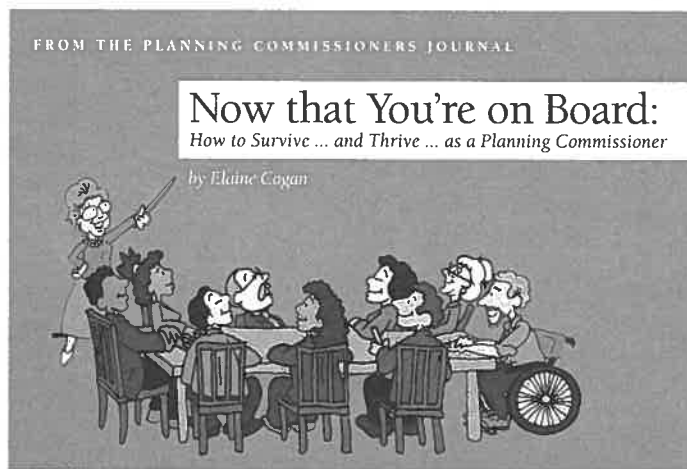
The majority of people in your community... older citizens, young people, ethnic or racial minorities ... are not likely to be seen, although your decisions may affect them greatly. Do not be satisfied with the status quo. Take your show on the road. Hold hearings and meetings in local schools or other venues easily reachable by the people most affected, and advertise these widely. You may have to start out slowly, but the word will soon get around that the

## Thank You, Elaine!

Note from *PCJ* Editor Wayne Senville:

After some 70 columns for our publication, this is Elaine Cogan’s last. It has been a pleasure to have worked with Elaine over an extended period of time. She’s covered an extraordinarily wide range of topics, always in a direct and thoughtful manner.

For those of you not aware, Elaine has also authored several books, including one which we were honored to publish not long ago, *Now that You’re on Board: How to Survive ... and Thrive ... as a Planning Commissioner*. For a complete list of Elaine Cogan’s columns published in the *PCJ*, go to: [www.plannersweb.com/articles/cogan.html](http://www.plannersweb.com/articles/cogan.html)



From Elaine’s first column, published in our very first issue, I knew that she would connect well with both citizen and professional planners. Respect and communications would be two constant themes in her columns.

“I have the greatest respect and admira-

tion for the thousands of citizens all over our country, people such as you, who volunteer precious time to serve on our local community planning boards and commissions. ... Your staff are in the front lines, at the counter or their desks every day; you read their reports and recommendations, show up for the commission meetings, listen to the citizens, and make the final decision. You are dependent upon each other if the planning function is to be carried out effectively, but yet, you have distinct and different roles.”

— From Elaine Cogan, “Things We Often Overlook,” *PCJ* #1.

Elaine also often reminded us of the need to involve those “less vocal constituencies.”

“Never worry that developers or landowners will be shy about voicing their

planning commission is accessible to the people and really interested in hearing from them. Over time, their attendance and attentiveness may pleasantly surprise you.

*Evaluate your environment.* Alas, most planning offices have not changed much in 19 years and there is still considerable room for improvement. Step into the office as if you were a citizen there for the first time. How welcoming is the atmosphere? What does that front entry communicate? Is it a heavy wood or glass door that is always shut? What about that ubiquitous counter? Is it a reasonable height? If staff cannot be there at all times, is there a bell people can ring for service, and will someone appear promptly? Are there comfortable chairs and reasonably current reading material? Are the signs in easily understood English and other languages if appropriate?

Give this same scrutiny to the room in which you hold your commission meetings. Do you sit on a dais, immediately creating a we/they atmosphere? Is there any way you can hold at least informal sessions on the same level as the audience? Can the public see the visual presentations or is the screen tilted only to

the board? Do you routinely use microphones so you can be heard by all? If you once again put yourself in the shoes of the public, you should be able to find ways to accommodate their needs as well as your own.

*Lead, not follow.* Planning decisions are often reactive. Receiving and acting upon requests to change existing rules and regulations are a significant part of your agenda, and probably will remain so. Even the common practice of updating the comprehensive or community plan is usually a matter of starting from where you are and building upon it.

Another aspect to your job that can be more challenging and far-reaching is leading your community in a wide-ranging visioning process that challenges people to think about the future to which they aspire. Maps, charts, and diagrams are still very much part of the technical background people need, but an open process that enables citizens to consider their values and how they might affect the future of their community can be inspirational for all and lead to different ways to consider even the most common planning issues.

*Embrace technology.* All communities seem to have web pages, but are yours up to date with notices and summaries of your meetings and hearings? Do you have a commission blog where you can have informal conversations with people? Are you aware of what others are blogging about in relation to planning issues? Encourage your staff to keep up with the latest forms of communication and use the technology to enhance the understanding and support for planning in your community.

*Enjoy yourself.* As seemingly endless as the job of planning commissioner may be, it should be personally satisfying and rewarding as you deal with the cutting-edge issues your community faces. Most of all, find time to have fun! ♦

Elaine Cogan, partner in the Portland, Oregon, planning and communications firm of Cogan Owens Cogan LLC, has worked for more than thirty years with communities undertaking strategic planning and visioning processes.



opinions about planning policies or programs. Planning affects them directly and they make it their business to follow what you are doing. But there may be other less vocal constituencies in your community equally deserving of attention. For example, non-profit social service agencies may be very interested in zoning matters that affect affordable housing. School advocates and members of adult and youth sports leagues are likely to be interested in park or open space policies. Before you make significant decisions, broaden the range of people you inform and involve on issues to obtain a true picture of the range of interests affected by planning decisions."

— From Elaine Cogan, "What's Your PMQ (Public Meeting Quotient)? PCJ #31

Another constant was Elaine calling on us to be aware of our own biases, while putting the best interests of the community first.

"Know yourself first, but put yourself last. What does that mean? Be self-critical, aware of your biases and preferences in terms of the issues the planning board faces. After you know and understand yourself, be willing – if needed – to set personal opinions aside to serve the best interests of your community."

— From Elaine Cogan's *Now That You're on Board*.

During commission meetings, especially during those years when I served as Chair, I always tried to remember Elaine's advice: be patient.

"Patience may be the first attribute you lose ... when it should be the one you hold on to most tenaciously. Train yourself to be patient with the process and with all the participants, and you will go a long way toward increasing your effectiveness."

— From Elaine Cogan, "Starting Out the New Year on the Right Foot," PCJ #8

"I will certainly miss the insightful articles that Ms. Cogan has authored over the past many years. I personally have appreciated her efforts in wanting to help commissioners perform their duties. I'm certain I speak for many in wishing her well."

— Robert Steiskal, Jr., CAPZO, Chairman, Gulf Shores [Alabama] Planning Commission

"I always enjoyed reading your work and sharing it with my planning board members. It was practical advice on topics of great interest. Best wishes."

— Ross A. Moldoff, AICP, Planning Director, Town of Salem, New Hampshire

"As usual, I enjoyed Elaine's insight into how planning commissions can improve their approach to an often difficult process. I have referred to Elaine's columns throughout my own career and think her final words are appropriately fitting for her last article. Good luck Elaine."

— Larry P. Frey, AICP, CFM, Bradenton, Florida