

Steps to Success for Planning and Zoning Officials

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In the best tradition of American government, the service of municipal planning and zoning officials reflects the notion that the soundest decisions are made by a cross-section of community representatives, donating their time and efforts in the public interest. Certainly, the work of planning and zoning boards and code enforcement can be thankless. Almost always, a decision can anger or frustrate as many as it pleases. Yet every day, often at night, these decisions are thoughtfully made by many of the thousands of citizen planning and zoning officials.

In talking with officials as well as the professionals working with them, and after attending hundreds of planning and zoning board meetings throughout the State, some common themes emerge to guide us on how to be a successful planning or zoning official. Perhaps there are more, but the following five (5) seem critical:

1. BE A COMMUNITY LEADER. You are a public official and a community leader. Enjoy and cultivate this special opportunity to play a direct role in helping shape the future of your town. Your elected officials have entrusted you to work in the public interest. Remember, too, that your actions as a leader have public consequences, good or bad, marginal or profound. Because planning and zoning decisions go directly to how land is used, and because people's land often is a critical individual or family asset, your work is acutely important to property owners and businesses. Sometimes these owners include peers, neighbors, friends, or even your family. Be sensitive to all these interests, yet make sure your leadership contributes toward a clear articulation of the public interest.

2. KNOW YOUR COMMUNITY, ITS GEOGRAPHY AND CHARACTER. Perhaps you are a long time resident and familiar with every hill and valley and each turn in every road. Great, as your knowledge will be invaluable. But if you are not as familiar do yourself and your board a favor, go out and tour your Town. Take your town plan along. Take along a map and note your impressions of the character of the landscape and the streets in various neighborhoods.

Remember the environment and community is never static change happens and can happen quickly. Businesses come and go, seasons and storms shift drainage patterns, or quiet

streets get busy. A thorough and fresh knowledge of your community and the dynamics that shape it are essential.

3. KNOW YOUR LOCAL REGULATIONS AND ALL REQUIRED PROCEDURES. There is simply no substitute for thorough preparation, and preparation starts with a knowledge of the regulations within your board's jurisdiction. Periodically review your Town plan and code, and always know where to get a copies for reference. Make sure you or someone on your board has some knowledge of the regulations of other agencies involved in land use permits including the codes from your neighboring municipalities. Never be afraid to ask questions of applicants, consultants, interested individuals, and your fellow town officials. When you need fuller expertise, get advice from a professional.

4. KNOW YOUR PARTNERS. At times planning and zoning work can be lonely. Yet you are not alone, there are many accessible partners that can help. County planning officials and staff as well as regional planning board staff in many regions are among the most dedicated professionals to be found. Other groups in your region such as the county real property office, cooperative extension, land trusts, rural or neighborhood preservation and housing groups, and advocacy organizations may have research or expertise of value.

State government entities such as the Local Government Program at the Department of State, and the State Attorney General's Office and the Office of the State Comptroller along with the regional offices of most state agencies can offer advice and may even issue informal written opinions on matters of municipal law or administration. And of course, never forget the assistance to be gained through membership in the Association of Towns and the New York Planning Federation - groups in both cases long dedicated to serving the needs of municipal officials and their staff.

5. TREAT EVERYONE WITH COURTESY AND RESPECT. Too often civic affairs seem cluttered with acrimony, mistrust, selfishness or greed from many sides. Occasionally, the motives or wisdom of town officials can be unfairly judged by applicants or citizens. Yet our experience tells us that a consistent policy of courtesy and respect is the way to overcome these less than flattering elements.

The great majority of people, no matter what their opinions on a particular matter, will ultimately respect a decision they believe is arrived at honestly. Board members who conduct themselves with respect and courtesy to others involved in the process can only help to ensure the integrity of their work.