



American Planning Association
Nevada Chapter

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Decisions by Officials

Bob Webb

Introduction

During my planning career, I wrote countless staff reports and appeared in front of appointed boards and elected officials seeking their decisions (or direction) on a myriad of planning topics. For the majority of these appearances, I was confident about the decisions to be rendered by the board and these were in conformance with the recommendations I provided in my staff reports. However, there were many occasions when I was befuddled by the board's decision and wondered to myself how the board could have reached that decision given the facts outlined in my staff report. At the time, I attributed these "wayward" decisions to outside factors over which I had little to no control (e.g., contradicting public testimony, developer or project proponent influence, etc.) and, therefore, it was not "my fault" that the decision was contrary to my recommendation.

The Decision Making Process

Recently, I have thought about these "wayward" decisions and how we, as professional planners, can prepare our

boards to decide on planning matters. I realize that these decisions are not "wayward", and the individual perspectives, experiences, and expertise of each boardmember. Such decisions should not be viewed as "bad" simply because they are not in conformance with the professional planner's recommendations. Rather, the decisions are the end result of a planning process designed to bring planning matters before boards for the culmination of the process – that is a decision¹.

I recently viewed a special on Public Television entitled *Hacking Your Mind*. In the three-part series, the writers postulated that decisions are divided into two distinct categories: logical decision making and intuitive (or "spur of the moment") decision making. Logical decision making is lengthy and involves the "higher" faculties of a person's brain. The person scrutinizes the issue, develops options, analyzes the options, discards non-viable options, and reaches a decision. Such logical decisions include matters such as a career choice, major investments or purchases, health care, changing a job or profession, etc. Logical decisions require time to process and, as according to the writers, are not the

¹ I recognize that some decisions are the end of a planning process, but part of an on-going process. For example, the decision by a board to approve a subdivision starts the process to create subdivision maps, issue

appropriate permits, and start construction. However, for a "pure" planning process, the subdivision approval by the board marks the end of the process.

decision making process of choice for most decisions.

The decision making choice most frequently used is the intuitive process. According to the series' writers, intuitive decision making involves minimal conscious thought. This type of decision making is "spur of the moment" or a decision based on a "gut feeling", and forms the basis for the majority of decisions made daily. Intuitive decisions can range from which coffee I am ordering at the take out window to a "snap" decision about a person based on first impressions. Intuitive decisions are often very difficult to overturn, as a person typically feels that they have "made up their mind" and are reluctant to make the efforts of logical decision making to change the decision.

Contributing to the Public Deliberation Process

So, what does this have to do with decisions by boards and elected officials? Staff reports created by professional planners are designed to involve the logical decision making processes of decision makers. Staff reports generally summarize a planning proposal, give background information on the proposal, outline options or alternatives, and provide a recommendation. A staff report engages the logical thinking processes and strives to help guide a decision maker to a prudent and logical decision (at least in the minds of the report writer!).

I do not believe that it is possible to create a staff report to trigger a decision maker's intuitive decision process, as the very nature of intuitive decisions do not encourage detailed examination of a planning proposal. In my experience, one realizes that decision makers are relying on

intuitive decision making when actually presented with a planning proposal before a board.

From my experience, sometimes a decisionmaker comes to a meeting with a decision, but often, the decision is made as a result of facts provided in the staff report and revealed during questions and answers, public testimony, and applicant presentations during the meeting. Public hearings often reveal new information. Sometimes that information corroborates all the information the staff report, other times it contradicts, and little can be done during the meeting to influence that decision. Board members can sometimes change their decision during dialogue with the planner, with the public, and/or with fellow board members. Planners should strive to engage board members in such dialogue, as permitted, when it becomes obvious that board members might be overlooking critical information which could inform a final decision.

In the end, however, planners should create staff reports which are succinct, easy to comprehend, and still appeal to the logical decision making process. Planners should understand that decision makers face a myriad of issues they must consider and address, and providing a staff report which is not "an exercise in writing" will help them focus on the important information within the report. Planners should include these important facts within the body of the report, and move less critical information into appendixes or attachments. For example, the technical information from another report (e.g., a traffic study, a geotechnical report, or a noise study) can often be moved into an appendix. Likewise, detailed comments from other agencies on a proposal can also be included as an appendix with only the critical agency

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recommendations or comments included in the staff report.

Conclusion

As professional planners, we must continue to write our reports and develop our oral presentations to focus on the logical decision making processes of our appointed and elected officials. These board members value the professional analysis of planners, and the report is our way of providing those opinions to them. Whether an appointed or elected official uses the logical or intuitive decision making process, it is our responsibility as professional planners to provide them with the tools (e.g., a well written report) to make those decisions.