



American Planning Association
Nevada Chapter

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Education for Appointed Boards

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Introduction

I firmly believe that education is a critical and fundamental component of a professional planner's career. Education, both initial (e.g., as in a college education) and on-going, ensures that planners "speak the same language", keeps planners abreast of the latest trends and initiatives within the planning profession, and encourages thoughtful discourse among planners and other related professionals. The American Planning Association (APA) recognizes the importance of education within its published Ethical Principles in Planning. The principles document states that members who are practicing planners should "Participate in continuing professional education".

Professional Development for Appointed Officials at Washoe County

Over my years in the planning profession, I have advocated to educate our appointed board members with the same zeal that we challenge professional planners to continue with their planning education. One can argue that appointed officials are as much of a "practicing planner" as are professional planners. The planning process depends heavily upon appointed officials to either decide or make recommendations on a wide range of planning projects, and knowledge of basic planning tools and

processes are critical to make informed decisions or recommendations.

During the latter part of my career at Washoe County, the County made a concerted effort to orient newly appointed Planning Commissioners and Board of Adjustment members to their duties and responsibilities. This orientation also contained an education component, mainly focused on the types of applications both boards would hear. The County also budgeted for APA membership for all Planning Commissioner and Board of Adjustment members. The County believed that APA membership would provide Planning Commissioners and Board of Adjustment members with the opportunity to learn about upcoming education opportunities, in addition to allowing them to receive copies of the monthly APA Planning magazine.

The County's efforts towards educating its appointed officials is commendable, but I believe that education efforts for appointed officials from all Nevada jurisdictions should be expanded and have a common curriculum. In this, I foresee that the Nevada Chapter of the APA could take a leadership role and establish exportable training programs for appointed officials. I suggest that any training program contain two components: initial training and on-going training.

Initial Training

Initial training should be provided to any new board member as soon as possible after appointment, and preferably prior to his/her first board meeting. Initial training could contain an orientation element and a planning profession education element. Orientation can be tailored to each jurisdiction's specific board, recognizing the differing roles of boards within each jurisdiction, and should contain, at a minimum:

- An overview of its board's role in its jurisdiction's planning processes, to include the types of planning projects and whether the board provides final decisions or recommendations on those projects;
- Requirements and expectations for individual board members;
- An overview of Nevada's Open Meeting Law requirements, focused on how those requirements are applied within its jurisdiction;
- An introduction to Robert's Rules of Order, which describe how meetings should be run, and the role of each member during the meeting (e.g., questions, motions, seconds, discussion and deliberations, findings, etc.); and,
- A synopsis of basic planning theories, practices, and trends (i.e., a condensed version of an undergraduate planning program).

The points above are merely a starting suggestion, and must be expanded to provide a truly profitable initial training session for new board members. If possible, board members should be provided an incentive for attending this

training in order to ensure attendance (given that board members almost always have "another life" and any training will likely occur during their "free time"). At Washoe County, the planning department budgeted a stipend for each board member to attend its orientation training sessions. This monetary incentive at least compensated board members for their time and helped ensure attendance at the session. However, if a jurisdiction lacks funds for a stipend, then meals and/or refreshments should at least be provided to board members during the training. Conversely, if incentives are not feasible or available, appointment to the appointed board could require attendance at training as a condition of appointment.

Initial training should ideally be accomplished in one session, but that depends upon the amount of information to be provided and the presenters. Sessions should be scheduled in the evening or weekends, again assuming that most board members have other jobs or responsibilities during a work day. New board members should be provided with handouts as "take aways" from the session. These documents can include the jurisdiction's zoning codes (or electronic links to the pertinent sections of codes), highlights or key points from the training, and a "cheat sheet" for how a normal meeting is conducted (sort of a checklist for members to follow and use).

Ongoing Training

The second component of the board member training program is on-going training. Happily, APA and the Chapter already have a robust on-going (i.e., continuous) training program in place. Board members should be provided with

APA membership, if possible, and instructions on how to use the continuing education opportunities provided by APA. However, understanding that board members will have other priorities, the Chapter should make concerted efforts to personally identify and invite board members to Chapter sponsored “brown bag” lunch seminars, conferences, and other learning opportunities. Again, incentives by a jurisdiction to attend on-going training will help encourage attendance at such sessions.

Conclusion

Finally, although this paper is focused on appointed board members, planning education for elected officials is a lofty goal that we, as planning professionals, should strive to achieve. Based on my experiences with elected officials, planning is but one small part of their elected duties and may not be the area in which an official elects to devote his/her time and attention. At a minimum, I suggest that the planning agency within each jurisdiction designate a planning professional to serve as the primary contact for their elected officials on questions of planning processes (not on specific projects, but rather on the overall planning process within the jurisdiction).

Given the wide range and number of other competing duties, it will be challenging for any planning agency to institute an effective training program for elected officials. This does not mean, however, that we as professionals should give up. Rather, I challenge the Chapter to start a discussion on how best to educate our elected officials on planning, ideally in both in initial and in on-going sessions.