

Meeting Management

A Mock Planning Commission Video

Presented for

Central California Planning Commissioner's Workshop
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Presented by

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Video Filmed by

APA

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WATCHING THE VIDEO: WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Welcome to the April 7, 1994 meeting of the City of Exaction Planning Commission! Please study the agenda before viewing the video in order to get a sense and feel for what you are about to observe. (The agenda follows this overview.)

The primary goal of the video is to present situations that could arise when a planning commission is faced with a rezoning request. On the agenda are twelve items. The video, by design, focuses on the first five items only. As you might imagine, the bulk of the commission's time will be spent with item five, which is ordinance 1044.

As with any planning commission meeting there are several things to look for as you watch the video. Please keep in mind the meeting characteristics you reviewed a few moments ago. Many of the characteristics are captured in the video, just as they are during an actual meeting of a real commission. Be on the lookout for them. They may play a role in making or breaking the hearing you are about to observe!

In addition to the meeting characteristics, there are several other "keys" to look for as you watch the video. Chief among them are the following questions:

1. Was the agenda reviewed by the commission prior to taking up items of business?
2. How would you characterize the contribution made by staff (Mr. Shades O'Gray)?
3. What impressions do you have relative to the staff report concerning Ordinance 1044? Was enough information given to the Exaction Planning Commission?
4. What impressions do you have regarding the visual aids used by the staff, as well as the visual aids used by the applicant? Were they adequate? Were they appropriate?
5. What strengths are witnessed by the commission during the public hearing on Ordinance 1044? What weaknesses, in your opinion, are present? Does the commission, during the hearing, display any bias?
6. Follow the actions of the chair closely. What kind of job does she do relative to the following situations:
 - Guiding the discussion?
 - Brokering disputes?
 - Keeping control?
 - Involving her fellow commissioners?
 - Managing the agenda?
 - Dealing with the public?
 - Maintaining her poise?
7. Mentally critique the conduct of the commission as they proceed through their agenda. What impressions do you have regarding the conduct, or actions, displayed by the Exaction commission toward the following groups or individuals:
 - The staff?
 - The applicant?
 - Persons who address the commission?
 - The commission chair?
 - Toward each other?
8. How would you characterize the action taken by the Exaction commission? Did they do the right thing? Would you have done something different? If so, what and why?
9. Imagine you are a newspaper reporter! How would you write up the meeting you just observed? Would the story be easy to write or difficult to write?
10. Record three positive impressions, as well as three negative impressions, you have as a result of watching the mock hearing.

CONTENT OBSERVATION GUIDE

(Check one blank for each question)

1.	Did the Commission members seem to understand the meeting's purpose?	Yes _____	No _____	In Between _____
2.	Did the Chairman, prior to discussing an item, explain the issue involved?	Yes _____	No _____	In Between _____
3.	Did Commission members seem to be well-informed about the issues being discussed?	Yes _____	No _____	In Between _____
4.	Did Commission members display an understanding of the technical aspects associated with the issues being discussed?	Yes _____	No _____	In Between _____
5.	Did Commission members appear confident when they took action on issues?	Yes _____	No _____	In Between _____
6.	Did the Commission (through the chair) initiate discussion on agenda items or did the Commission defer to the staff for discussion?	Initiated _____	Deferred _____	Combination _____
7.	Did the Chairman guide the meeting in a fair and consistent manner?	Yes _____	No _____	

PROCESS OBSERVATION GUIDE

(Check one blank for each question)

1.	The meeting atmosphere (among members) seemed friendly and pleasant.	Yes _____	No _____	In Between _____
2.	All members seemed eager to participate in the meeting.	Yes _____	No _____	In Between _____
3.	All members participated in the discussion, not just a few.	Yes _____	No _____	In Between _____
4.	Members seemed to stay with the task; there was little wandering.	Yes _____	No _____	In Between _____
5.	Members felt safe in speaking out.	Yes _____	No _____	In Between _____
6.	The chair initiated, directed and encouraged discussion of agenda items.	Yes _____	No _____	In Between _____
7.	The meeting ran smoothly; there was little grandstanding by members.	Yes _____	No _____	In Between _____
8.	Did the Commission actively listen for citizen input.	Yes _____	No _____	In Between _____

9.	Staff persons present (planner, administrator, etc.) provided only technical assistance to the Commission. Staff did not actively become involved in the meeting.	Yes _____	No _____	In Between _____
10.	In your opinion, was the Commission interested in what the public had to say.	Yes _____	No _____	In Between _____
11.	Did it appear to you that Commission members had already made up their mind relative to agenda items.	Yes _____	No _____	In Between _____
12.	At the end of the meeting, the Commission evaluated (debriefed) the process.	Yes _____	No _____	In Between _____

SUMMARY MEETING IMPRESSIONS - CONTENT AND PROCESS:

In addition to studying the content and process elements associated with the mock hearing, several other debriefing issues are worthy of observation and comment. Chief among them are the following:

1. Do any members of the Exaction Planning Commission have a conflict of interest? If so, what action would you recommend they consider and why? Record your response.
2. In your opinion, did any members of the Exaction Planning Commission engage in ex parte communication? Was this wrong? Would it be wrong in your community? What can be done to avoid ex parte communication? Record your response.

3. Should witnesses who appear before a planning commission be sworn in? What is the rule in your community? Record your response.

4. How far should a planning commission go in getting its business out to the public? Should meeting dates be posted? Record your answer.

5. What should a commission chair do when citizens become unruly, loud or disruptive? Should citizens be asked to leave? Can citizens be removed from a hearing? Record your answer.

IMPROVING YOUR COMMISSION MEETINGS

POINTS TO CONSIDER AND EXERCISES

Several strategies, as well as resources, can be used to improve the quality of local planning commission meetings. The videotape you have watched, as well as the accompanying workbook, were developed to function as learning tools for managing commission meetings. In addition to these resources, we would like to use this opportunity to comment on several meeting management strategies that may be of assistance as you seek ways to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of your planning commission meetings.

Rules of Procedure

Taking time to capture in words how your meetings will be run, how business will be transacted, how the public will be treated, and expectations the commission will place upon its membership, are typically included in a rule of procedure statement. Rules of procedure can be included in the commission's bylaws, or it can be a stand alone publication. Strong consideration should be given to developing rules of procedure.

Improved Time Management

The success a commission achieves is a function of numerous variables, *including* the efficient use of meeting time.

The road to more effective meetings should begin with an examination of how you currently manage your time. Two rather simple exercises can help provide you with this information. All you need to complete the exercises are a sheet of paper and two drawings of blank clock faces, showing a 60-minute span of time.

Exercise #1: Determining the Relative Proportions of Your Pre-Meeting Time.

To complete the first exercise, list the various planning commission related activities you engage in before scheduled meetings on the blank sheet. Such activities could include time spent reading and studying reports, visiting sites that will be featured in upcoming meetings, talking to staff members or citizens, and the like.

Next draw and label lines on the first clock face that correspond to the activities and the amount of time you devote to each. At this point in the exercise it is important to understand that you must "condense" your activities to fit the sixty minute time frame. In other words, if you spend half your between-meeting planning related activity on reading and studying reports, you should draw a line on the clock running from twelve to six, representing half of the total sixty minutes - regardless of whether the actual time you spent reviewing reports was, say, one hour or three hours. The goal is to determine relative proportions.

Exercise #2: Determining the Relative Proportions of Your Meeting Time.

This exercise is the same as the first one, except that you are now indicating how you spend your meeting time. Again, first list the kind of activities your commission engages in during meetings (i.e., public hearings, discussing issues, old business). Next, determine the proportion of time you spend on each type of activity, and display this on the second clock face.

By calculating how you spend your time, and then seeing it starkly displayed on a clock face, you might be surprised. Do the relative amounts of time you spend on various activities - both at your meeting and between meetings - correspond to their relative importance? Does your time allocation correspond to your commission's priorities? For some commissions and commissioners, this exercise may reveal that real priorities are being "buried" by time spent on activities which are not as significant.

DEBRIEFING YOUR COMMISSION MEETING: A MORE FORMAL APPROACH

Your commission can also improve its meetings through another technique--a formal debriefing survey. The survey form listed here may help your commission and staff identify weak areas, as well as confirm things you're doing right. Try conducting this survey at the end of your next commission meeting.

Debriefing Survey Form

Circle the appropriate number:

1-strongly agree, 2-agree, 3-undecided
4-disagree, 5-strongly disagree

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1) I was notified of this meeting in sufficient time to prepare for it. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2) I understood why this meeting was being held and what specific outcomes were expected. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3) I understood what was expected of me as a participant and what was expected of the other participants. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4) I understood how the meeting was intended to flow and when it would end. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5) Most participants listened carefully to each other. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6) Most participants expressed themselves openly, honestly, and directly. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7) Agreements were explicit and clear, and conflicts were openly explored and constructively managed. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8) The meeting generally proceeded as intended and achieved its intended purpose. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9) My participation contributed to the outcomes achieved by the meeting. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10) Overall, I was satisfied with this meeting and feel my time was well spent. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

LEADERSHIP SKILLS FOR THE COMMISSION CHAIR

The skill a chairperson displays in running a meeting can mean the difference between success and failure. Ideally, the leader should facilitate the meeting by encouraging open communication, ensuring equality of participation, and interpreting and clarifying the discussion towards the resolution of objectives or purposes identified by the group. An additional responsibility of the leader is to alert group members that they also share in the responsibility for successful or less than successful meetings. Reviewing task functions and maintenance functions is one way to accomplish this task.

Task functions are those activities which contribute to the purpose, objective, or goal of the group. Maintenance functions are those activities and actions which must be monitored in order to keep the group in good operating order. Although all group members share in this total responsibility, the group leader must be particularly conscious of the functions and their interface in a meeting environment. A summary of common task and maintenance functions follows.

Task Functions

These are functions required in selecting and carrying out a group task.

1. **Initiating Activity:** proposing solutions, suggesting new ideas, new definitions of the problem, new attack on the problem, or new organization of material.
2. **Seeking Information:** asking for clarification of suggestions, requesting additional information or facts.
3. **Seeking Opinion:** looking for an expression feeling about something from the members, seeking clarification of values, suggestions, or ideas.
4. **Giving Information:** offering facts or generalizations, relating one's own experience to the group problem to illustrate points.
5. **Giving Opinion:** stating an opinion or belief concerning a suggestion or one of several suggestions, particularly concerning its value rather than its factual basis.
6. **Elaborating:** clarifying, giving examples or developing meanings, trying to envision how a proposal might work if adopted.
7. **Coordinating:** showing relationship among various ideas or suggestions, trying to pull ideas and suggestions together, trying to draw together activities of various subgroups or members.
8. **Summarizing:** pulling together related ideas or suggestions, restating suggestions after the group has discussed them.

Maintenance Functions

These are functions required in strengthening and maintaining group life and activities.

1. **Encouraging:** being friendly, warm, responsive to others, praising others and their ideas, agreeing with and accepting contributions of others
2. **Gatekeeping:** trying to make it possible for another member to make a contribution to the group by saying, "We haven't heard anything from Jan yet," or suggesting limited talking time for everyone so that every member will have a chance to be heard
3. **Standard Setting:** expressing standards for the group to use in choosing its content or procedures or in evaluating its decisions, reminding group to avoid decisions which conflict with group standards
4. **Following:** going along with decisions of the group, thoughtfully accepting ideas of others, serving as an audience during group discussion
5. **Expressing Group Feeling:** summarizing the group's feeling, describing reactions of the group to ideas or solutions

Combined Task and Maintenance Functions

1. **Evaluating:** comparing group decisions or accomplishments to group standards, measuring accomplishments against goals
2. **Diagnosing:** determining sources of difficulties and appropriate steps, analyzing the main blocks to progress
3. **Testing for Consensus:** tentatively asking for group opinions in order to find out whether the group is nearing consensus on a decision, sending up trial balloons to test group opinions
4. **Mediating:** harmonizing, conciliating differences in points of view, making compromise solutions
5. **Relieving Tension:** draining off negative feeling by jesting or pouring oil on troubled waters, putting a tense situation in wider context

A group strengthens itself and improves its chance of being effective when its members become more conscious of the role function needed at all times, as well as more sensitive to and aware of the degree to which they can help meet group needs through their group actions. This sense of "oneness," in many instances, is the quality we see in some groups but have a hard time labeling.

TIPS FOR BETTER MEETINGS

There is no foolproof way to insure that a meeting will always be productive and effective. However, good planning, member involvement, and competent leadership are steps in the right direction. The following meeting management techniques, which should be viewed as a unitary design, will also help.

Before the Meeting

- Define the purpose for the meeting
- Develop an agenda and plan the activities for the meeting
- Distribute the agenda in advance of the meeting
- Arrange the meeting room such that members will feel welcomed and will want to participate

Starting and Conducting Meetings

- Start the meeting on time
- Review the agenda and explain the meeting's purpose
- Stick to the agenda and move through it in an efficient manner
- Seek to involve everyone in the discussion
- Keep the discussion focused by keeping notes and summarizing
- Serve as a meeting facilitator and not meeting dominator

End of the Meeting

- End the meeting on time
- Recap the meeting's highlights/accomplishments
- Review and assign any after-meeting duties
- Debrief the meeting with the participants
- Brainstorm about the next meeting's agenda
- Set the date, time and place for the next meeting
- Thank everyone for attending and participating

After the Meeting

- Review the debriefing results
- Prepare the meeting's minutes and distribute them
- Compare the meeting agenda with what actually happened
- Monitor the progress toward completion of assigned duties and tasks