

The Role of the Layman in Planning

By Carl J. Mays

Editor's Note: *Since the New York Planning Federation turned 75 years old in 2012 and will be holding its 75th Annual Planning & Zoning Conference this year in Saratoga Springs; we have been digging through our archives and reprinting some early articles from "Planning News" as a way of commemorating the organization's prestigious history.*

The following originally appeared in the March-April 1957 issue of "Planning News." The author was then Director of Planning for Orange County.

It is my task to discuss the role of the layman in planning, or as the word 'role' is defined in Webster's Dictionary, the part performed by an actor in a drama. In this particular instance the drama is better known as the planning process and the actors are those who are not a part of the official governing body or planning board.

This large group, most of the time quite silent, are the beneficiaries of our planning efforts and so it does seem logical that they should be involved, somehow, in our plans. It has frequently been the practice of planning boards and planners alike to work quietly for months and then emerge with the all-knowing plan that meets with bitter opposition by the very same groups of people that they had hoped to aid. Is this the fault of the plan or the planners? The planners are obviously at fault, for if the same plan were handled, or should I say sold, in a more judicious manner, its chance of acceptance would be assured. After all, as we have heard so often, planning is for the people and so it follows that even the best plans will prove fruitless without the organized participation and support of the citizen.

Simply stated, the role of the layman in the planning process is to participate. We who are responsible for planning action must make every effort to draw the citizen into every phase of our operation. I believe that widespread participation will be to the

mutual benefit of both planner and citizen for the following reasons:

1. We will have created an auxiliary labor force to assist the planning board in its search for pertinent data;
2. We will then have the broadest expression of opinion for establishing the needs of the community;
3. We also will have created the means for an excellent public relations team that will spread the word among their own interest groups and who will, in turn, lend their support for planning measures that they can understand;
4. Once a citizens group feels that it has had a share in the planning thinking, it will take a watchdog attitude in protecting the integrity of the plan.

When I speak of citizen participation I mean a representation of community interest in the broadest terms, from the local Chamber of Commerce to the Ladies Garden Club. I have had the pleasure of discussing master plan proposals before the League of Women Voters as well as the YMCA; school site recommendations before the PTA as well as the official school body. And I have also discussed off-street parking needs with the Women's Monday Afternoon Club as well as the Chamber of Commerce.

Recently, in a community where I served as consultant to the Planning Board, our big project was the promulgation of a new zoning ordinance. The old ordinance was outdated and patched with amendments, making stringent new concepts necessary. The planning board was quite aware of this but faced the job with some doubts as to its ability to convince the community of the soundness of its solutions. Rather than weaken the zoning proposals with

compromises to what we might assume was the level of acceptance by the community at large, we embarked on a scheme that would enable us to gauge public opinion and at the same time enlist support for our goals.

A joint meeting of the governing body and planning board was held to discuss this dilemma, and out of the meeting a program of local citizen participation evolved. The Mayor and the six Councilmen would each appoint two citizens to form a fourteen member Citizens Advisory Committee on Zoning. This body would be responsible to the governing body and would file a report on its findings of the Planning Board's zoning recommendation. Members of this committee would represent all the major interest groups in town, including political parties as well as individual prominent citizens, better known as civic leaders.

It might seem that we had set the stage for the maximum of confusion as to who was to do what, but keep in mind that the Planning Board's work on zoning had just commenced. In this initial stage, while the board pondered over existing land use maps and population and economic studies, I was meeting every two weeks with the Citizens Advisory Committee and conducting what amounted to a planning seminar on why certain recommendations seemed necessary, based on the same research data the Planning Board had before it.

Here then was the opportunity to lead a cross section of the community through the mass of data that should preclude any zoning ordinance and give these people a sound basis for criticism. The fourteen members of this committee, all who were unknown to me prior to our first meeting, brought with them all the fears and prejudices of the unknown as is not unusual to anyone unfamiliar with this business called planning. They did, however, bring an attitude of serious responsibility to their appointed job, and this is one of the more important requirements.

By the time the Planning Board's recommendations were finally completed, there was a thorough understanding by the citizens committee of what the problems were and how they might be solved. I had the chance to report to the Planning Board the thoughts raised by the citizens committee as a result of their concerns, and these ideas were weighed by the Planning Board in considering their own solutions.

Simultaneously, the various members of the Citizens Advisory Committee were reporting to their own individual organizations their progress and their understanding of the Town's problems and making many a friend for the Planning Board in the process. This serves to illustrate what I meant when I said citizen action can create a public relations team to aid the planner in his work.

When the Planning Board's zoning recommendations were submitted to the governing body for their consideration for ordinance preparation, the Mayor and Council also had a report from the Citizens Advisory Committee, a report that was quite favorable to the Planning Board's suggestions. The citizens report also gave an excellent insight into public acceptance of the proposals, as well as allaying fears of pressure that could be brought upon the elected officials.

This entire procedure took about eighteen months to complete. I probably could have written an ordinance in six months; the Planning Board perhaps a year. I sincerely doubt that either work would have been passed in ordinance form without the assistance of the citizens group. The planner's greatest opponent is ignorance, and what better way than through citizen action can we attack the stigma of suspicion and prejudice that appears to be the inevitable reaction to so many planning proposals?

In conclusion, I will repeat, the role of the layman is to participate. And for this participation to be effective it should be focused on specific projects and related to official governmental procedure. ■