

## Section 3

# Politics and Planning

*“[T]he buck stops with the elected officials, but it begins with the planning department. The type of guidance and recommendations [planners] give have a big impact.”*

— Durham, North Carolina, Mayor Bill Bell<sup>1</sup>

To be successful, planners must have support from their community’s elected officials. Fortunately, the goals of planners and elected officials are mutually beneficial. “Great planning ideas,” says Maxine Griffith, AICP, vice president for Government and Community Affairs at Columbia University in New York City, “make for good politics.” How, then, do you meet the expectations of local officials and align your goals with these leaders?

### 3.1 Where to begin

Local officials approach planning from a variety of perspectives. At the same time, they are often put “on the spot” about a particular situation or, alternatively, they may be articulating a long-range planning vision for their community that appeals to a large majority of residents. Regardless, all local officials need to justify their actions with local constituents, and planners can help them identify how to do so.

“Surviving the political arena is not something you learn in planning school,” writes retired planning consultant Linda L. Davis, FAICP, a contributor to the book, *Planners on Planning*. “You do not have to love politics to be in planning, but you have to be sensitive to the politics of planning to survive,” she adds.<sup>2</sup>

Most local officials do not come from a planning background. While they may have a general understanding of growth, housing, transportation, or other planning-related issues, they expect others to be able to provide them with more detailed or nuanced knowledge. It is important to remember that elected officials have a host of other concerns. They do not have the time, background, or interest



Courtesy Linda Davis

Author and planning consultant (retired) Linda Davis, FAICP.

#### 3.1.1

**Align your goals with those of local officials**

to delve into planning as deeply as you and your colleagues. Rather than viewing this lack of expertise as a burden, use it as an opportunity to help local officials understand the value and benefits of planning.

Effective communications with local elected or appointed officials requires:

- understanding the local political context (Section 3.2)
- taking into account local officials' views and platforms (Section 3.3)
- finding common ground and developing relationships (Section 3.4)
- delivering messages for specific audiences and situations (Section 3.5)
- using repetition, persistence, and patience (Section 3.6)



Charlotte-Mecklenburg County Government

Example of a newsletter from the City of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, tailored specifically to elected officials.

### 3.1.2

**Elected officials are busy—5 tips for making the most of your communications with them**

## 3.2 Local political context

Always remember that the local political situation has far more impact on the outcome of planning-related decisions than the principles of good planning. Part of the planner's job is to inject planning principles into the political process. To be successful, you need to understand the structure of your local government, how planning fits into that structure, how growth and planning-related issues are viewed, and who traditionally speaks on planning-related issues.

### 3.2.1

**Planners' role in decision making varies with structure of local government**

In any particular community there are generally as many as five types of local government — county, municipality, town or township, special district, and school district. While it is not necessary to understand the details of each of these types, the following are two important details to keep in mind:

- **Jurisdiction.** Each government will be most concerned with the issues within its jurisdiction. Hence, city governments will be interested in local city issues, but less likely to be concerned with county-wide matters. Planners should be aware of circumstances in which jurisdictions overlap, such as instances where there may be special districts or school districts seeking to address issues in the same area as another layer of government.
- **Power Structure.** Overall, planners should have a sense of where the real decision-making power lies in their community. In some cases it may be at the county or regional level, while in others it may be at the city level. At the city level, planners should understand the relationship among mayors, city council members, and city administrators (where applicable). In particular, they should understand where the bulk of the power is vested—in the mayor or in the council as a whole.

In addition, planners often work closely planning commissions. Whether it is a city, county, or regional group (in some areas all three may exist), it is important to have a firm understanding of the planning commission’s role in local decisions—whether advisory or something more directive.

With so many layers of local government to consider, it can be difficult to understand where planners fit in. Front-line planners may have higher-ups at the planning department. Planners at all levels often must interact with a host of officials including planning commission members, city council members, and county supervisors. Whatever your position, it is important to understand the source of the decision-making authority for planning and where you and your organization are in relation to that authority.

Regardless of the hierarchy, it is likely to involve elected officials and their constituents. Adds Davis, “The public is ultimately the planner’s customer and boss... and the planner’s primary responsibility is to work in the public’s interest.”<sup>3</sup>

Besides assessing the local political structure of your community, it’s important to consider the “internal” attitude toward the involvement of planners in local politics. Many city governments prefer that their planners stay “behind-the-scenes,” interacting as little as possible with local officials. Others allow planners more latitude (within limits, of course). Before implementing any local officials’ communications effort, be sure you understand the norm for your department or organization and, most importantly, understand that these norms may change over time. The best way to find out what is expected is to ask supervisors or local officials and to keep your ear to the ground for any indication of changing relationships. In addition, it is absolutely essential that planners have an understanding of any legal restrictions that may be in place regarding communication between city or county employees and local officials. Such restrictions may range from limiting communications immediately before a hearing or vote to an outright ban on all discussions.

It’s likely that your target audiences and the community in general have pre-conceived ideas about planners and planning. Citizens in some areas may be more predisposed toward preservation of open space, while elsewhere citizens may be more concerned about attracting jobs and economic development. Such perceptions are often related to a community’s demographics and economic conditions.

In Omaha, Nebraska, citizens raised objections to establishing historic designations because of fears that the designations would limit owners’ ability to manage their property. “Inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places sounds great. But the 32 people who attended an information-



Omaha Planning Department

Addressing residents’ fears and questions enabled officials in Omaha, Nebraska, to resolve concerns about historic property designation in the city. Shown here is the Blackstone Hotel, located on 36th Street and listed on the National Register of Historic Properties.

### 3.2.2

**Planners report to many decision makers but the electorate ultimately holds sway**

### 3.2.3

**Possible legal restrictions on communications between staff and elected officials.**

### 3.2.4

**Information can dispel mistrust and allay fears—as occurred in Omaha, Nebraska**

al meeting wanted to know... if their property taxes would go up... and if any restrictions would be imposed on the way they manage or dispose of their properties." Once citizens knew the answer was "no" to both questions, they relaxed and were able to accept the idea.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.2.5

**Different viewpoints exist in every community and vary over time as well**

The views of citizens in a community are rarely homogenous. Disagreements will always exist between, for example, those who support new developments and those who want to keep things the way they are. One of the best ways to gain the attention of elected officials is to understand these perspectives and help elected officials communicate with various constituencies. In Tampa, Florida, for instance, conflicts about growth are not just between residents and developers: Many growth issues have "...pitted residents with competing interests against one another—a large landowner who wants to sell versus neighbors who oppose more growth. Or a small-business owner who wants to increase sales versus residents who oppose the increased traffic."<sup>5</sup> One should never underestimate the value of bad news to help move forward a positive planning agenda. It's important to be on the look-out for ways to help you make your point.



Hernando County Government Broadcasting

Houses under construction in Hernando County, Florida. Rising housing values helped the county overcome long-standing opposition to increasing impact fees.

Neither are citizens' views consistent over time. They are likely to vary as a community's economy and demography change. In Hernando County, Florida, fluctuations in the housing market altered the discussion about increasing impact fees. While in the past builders successfully argued that raising fees would harm the economy, major increases in recent housing values dispelled that assertion. Builders subsequently stopped opposing efforts by planners to increase impact fees in order to offset growth and development expenses.<sup>6</sup>

As much as planners get caught in the crossfire of such debates, elected officials are caught even more. Planners can help local officials work through contentious issues by ensuring that proposed plans reflect both the needs and interests of the community as well as good planning principles.

### 3.2.6

**Help elected officials caught in crossfire**

Before talking with local officials also consider who traditionally speaks on planning issues in your community. Besides not stepping on someone else's toes by talking out of turn, it's important to coordinate your positive message on planning with those who generally address these issues. Keep in mind that there are not likely to be one or two individuals but many people. To find out who local reporters turn to for quotes about planning issues, review news stories about planning issues. Likely spokespeople include:

- mayor
- city council member who also may be head of the planning bureau
- planning commission members

- planning director
- planning consultant
- individual planners

### 3.3 Local officials' policy perspectives, views, and platforms

Factors to consider when considering your officials' unique political and policy perspectives include:

- What offices do they hold?
- With what parts of local government are they most closely aligned?
- What disagreements or tensions exist between local officials?
- Where do officials stand on planning issues?

Overall, planners should recognize that officials are concerned with the views of all citizens in all areas of policy, seeking to achieve a balance between growth and sustainability, job creation and environmental protection, community needs and individual rights. While planners spend a considerable amount of time on the empirical and technical aspects of planning, appointed and elected officials—who ultimately decide whether to adopt a plan or not—are likely to place greater emphasis on the needs, values, and interests of citizens than on a plan's technical aspects or finer points.

Local officials generally will identify with a particular branch of local government, whether at the village, city, county, or regional level. Village or city officials are likely to be more concerned with the interests of the discrete group of citizens living within a particular city boundary. While many of them may intellectually understand the benefits of a more regional approach, they should not be expected to support plans that will benefit another city at the expense of their own. An example from Sacramento County, California, where efforts are underway to develop and implement a regional growth plan, illustrates this common outlook:

*"A few [Elk Grove] council members," a newspaper article reports, "have shown distrust over how SACOG [Sacramento Council of Governments] might carry out its Blueprint Project. Specifically, they are concerned that SACOG will upset or even usurp local planning authority."<sup>7</sup>*

In almost every community there are underlying tensions or political concerns that lead to ongoing disagreements between local officials. Planners need to consider the most common underlying causes behind these disagreements when developing their communication strategies:

- **Differing political perspectives.** Local officials, first and foremost, are political. Usually they are affiliated with one or another political party and may come to the issues surrounding planning with preconceived ideas about what is best for the community. Some may be more supportive of a free-market approach, while others may seek a stronger government role in managing growth.

#### 3.2.7

**Examples of spokespeople who can deliver your planning messages**

#### 3.3.1

**Local resistance to regionalism often stems from fears of losing local control**

#### 3.3.2

**Determine the political differences that cause tension**

### 3.3.3

**“Home-rule” is a barrier to regional cooperation but can be addressed by well-executed outreach**

- **Local versus regional governments.** Differences between officials from local and regional governments are another source of tension. Effective communications requires planners to take into account such differences as well as understand the potential tensions that exist between different jurisdictions.

A carefully planned communications strategy directed toward local officials, however, can help planners successfully address tensions between home rule communities. City officials in Palm Springs Village, Florida, were tremendously successful in their annexation efforts without alienating the owners of the property they were acquiring. Over seven years, the village nearly doubled its population and tripled its tax base through a “...methodical expansion plan aimed at keeping taxes low and growth paced. The village annexed businesses to boost its tax base, then brought in residential neighborhoods.”



Palm Springs Village Department of Land Development

Good communications with affected property owners helped Palm Springs Village, Florida, officials avoid controversy when implementing an annexation.

Local officials achieved their goal through a targeted and, at times, grueling citizen-by-citizen approach. “We did it one property at a time,” Mayor Mike Davis says, pointing out that “...what’s most important is the day-to-day drudgery of doing the same thing, replicating your success. It’s not real exciting, but it works.” The village’s annexation efforts have not been without controversy—in

fact, county commissioners opposed the village’s early annexation efforts, for the same home-rule concerns that communities across the country share. County commissioners eventually changed their minds about the annexations and praised the growth of Palm Springs Village when they understood the benefits to their jurisdiction.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.3.4

**Elected and appointed officials have different motivations**

- **Elected versus appointed.** Differences between elected and appointed officials often create tension. It is important to know whether such tensions exist in your community. In many cases, this occurs because elected officials feel that appointed officials are not being responsive enough to citizens. A member of the Philadelphia city council, for instance, introduced legislation to reduce the power of the city’s Historical Commission, which is governed by an appointed board, because the council member felt her lower-income constituents were shut out of the preservation process:

*“There have been meetings in my district to make a historic area, but the total community wasn’t included, particularly poor residents. It’s come to a head, so I had to do something,” says council member Jannie Blackwell.<sup>9</sup>*

Are the elected leaders in your community prepared to be, or are they already, champions or adversaries of planning? Or, are they generally uninformed about what plan-

ners do? Knowing where they stand is one of the most important factors to guide how you approach and communicate with these leaders.

**Champions.** Some local officials will be strong champions and may even lead the charge in favor of quality planning. Charlotte, North Carolina, Mayor Patrick McCrory, who has long been recognized as a champion of positive planning, notes that the Charlotte city and Mecklenburg County region firmly believes in smart growth: “If we don’t make decisions now in the right way, four, five, and six generations down the road will be asking, ‘What were they thinking?’”<sup>10</sup>

Sometimes local officials can assist as champions for specific aspects of the planning process. For example, Bonnie Conner, a former District 8 council member in San Antonio, Texas, and longtime champion of San Antonio’s Hill Country resources, worked with the city’s planning department to protect and preserve the area. She wrote an open letter to the investment company proposing to develop an important wildlife habitat, raising questions relating to water quality, endangered species, and environmental mitigation. She was instrumental in drawing the connection between water quality and protection of green spaces.<sup>11</sup>

Local officials also demonstrate their “champion” status by taking the lead on larger scale planning initiatives. In Buffalo, New York, for example, former Mayor Anthony M. Masiello focused much of his time and political capital while in office on planning issues, including the development of the Queen City Hub action plan, which received a 2005 APA National Planning Award. The 150-page document is guiding a \$1 billion effort to rebuild and revitalize downtown Buffalo.<sup>12</sup>



Chattanooga Mayor’s Office

Planning advocate and Chattanooga Mayor Ron Littlefield, AICP.

Chattanooga, Tennessee, Mayor Ron Littlefield, AICP, uses his planning expertise to govern his community. One of his themes is “nourishing the neighborhoods” because, as he says, “nothing is more essential to a healthy city than healthy neighborhoods.”<sup>13</sup>

Besides knowing which elected officials are champions of good planning practices, it’s important to have an understanding of why they’ve chosen to be champions and whether their support is limited to specific issues.

**Uninformed.** Some elected officials won’t know much about planning. While this may seem frustrating, these officials are good candidates for educating about the “good planning” point of view. Consider what happened in West Chester, Pennsylvania, where former supervisor Bob Genzano initially questioned the need for a director of planning and zoning because the community had a planning commission.<sup>14</sup> At first Genzano did not understand enough

### 3.3.5

**Champions, often local officials, can drive the push for quality planning in their areas—they should be recognized and engaged**

### 3.3.6

**An uninformed elected official is an opportunity for education and engagement**

about the planning process to recognize the benefits a professional planner would provide to the existing, all-volunteer planning commission. Eventually he realized those benefits and lauded the decision to hire a professional. It is important to remember that many local officials—even some appointed to the planning commission—will have little or no experience with the planning process.

### 3.3.7

**Outreach can transform our relationship with adversarial local officials**

**Adversaries.** Some local officials strongly oppose planning, thinking it interferes with economic development or with an owner's property rights. Cincinnati Mayor Charles Luken is such an official. Having agreed with the findings of the Mayor's Task Force on Economic Development, he virtually eliminated the city's planning department. Today only the minimal planning functions required by law are undertaken under the auspices of the Department of Community Development. Ironically, Cincinnati was the first city in the United States to adopt a comprehensive plan, making the loss that much more disheartening. Nonetheless, planners in neighboring Hamilton County are leading a very robust and highly participatory regional planning initiative titled Community Compass. (For more information, including the effort's communications and public participation strategies, visit <http://www.communitycompass.org>.)

### 3.4.1

**APA messages are a starting point for identifying common ground**

## 3.4 Finding common ground, building relationships and trust

When developing a strategy for working with elected officials who are uninformed or have an opposing viewpoint it is essential to identify the common ground between you and these officials. This is especially important in situations where there might be disagreements. APA's messages are strongly centered on themes that focus on common values. For example, everyone can agree on a goal of creating communities of lasting value. While individual definitions of "lasting value" and the role planners play in achieving this goal may differ, the message focuses on a point of commonality.

Doreen Liberto-Blanck, AICP, a planning consultant who also serves on the San Luis Obispo, California, planning commission, uses her training and experience in mediation to help communities work through disagreements using collaboration:

### 3.4.2

**Planning consultant Doreen Liberto-Blanck advocates for collaboration, not compromise**

"In a compromise, both sides often end up giving something up and walking away unhappy. But by finding out what's really at stake," she says, "a solution that works equally for both sides can sometimes be crafted." A case in point is Arroyo Grande, where a proposed commercial development in a residential neighborhood prompted concern from the residents about noisy delivery trucks. By identifying both the key concerns and common areas of interest, Liberto-Blanck helped craft an agreement that limited when and where trucks could be used for deliveries. Both sides benefited, with certainty for the commercial businesses on knowing when deliveries could occur and certainty for the community on knowing that deliveries would not take place during leisure hours.<sup>15</sup>

When talking with officials with whom you disagree, it is important to not be disagreeable. Consider the case of Tom Jacobson, former planning director for Chesterfield County, Virginia:

Known during his tenure as the “man everyone loved to blame,” Tom Jacobson nevertheless maintained cordial relations even with those who opposed his work. According to Jacobson, his approach has always been to put forth to elected officials his and his staff’s best approach to a particular planning-related issue. The department would always hold to the ideal of giving the best professional advice outside politics. That said, the planning staff also would work with local officials to go in another direction if those officials disagreed with what was proposed. Jacobson credits this professional approach with giving his department a reputation for credibility and, over time, has built a level of trust with local officials. As Roger Habeck, executive director of the Chesterfield County Chamber of Commerce, put it in a newspaper interview, “Tom and I will never be friends...but he is a competent planner.” Chesterfield County Planning Commissioner Sherman Litton noted, “[Tom is] very easy and accommodating, but at the same time he’s got one of them planners’ heads on him.”<sup>16</sup>

With those officials you know will always say “no” to a particular question, try asking a different question. Often, local officials will form firm opinions on questions related to growth management, and these opinions can be very difficult to shift. Rather than entering into a public dispute (and perhaps causing officials to “dig in” to their particular perspective), consider approaching them from a different perspective. Start by listening to their point of view and asking questions to better understand why they think the way they do. Planners can then seek a cause for the source of the disagreement as opposed to continuing unproductive arguments and acrimony.

One of the most important steps in finding common ground with local officials is building long-term relationships and trust. Because local officials face a wide range of issues, they depend upon knowledgeable and reliable staff, friends, and others to help them understand policy proposals and how they might impact their community. Over time, many local officials develop relationships with people to whom they turn. It takes time and effort to build the kind of trust necessary to become a trusted advisor. That said, it is one of the most effective ways for planners to help local officials understand the benefits of planning.

Building trust over time is essential, whether the messages you will be using are those developed by APA or yourself. It is not enough to simply walk up to local officials and say, for example, “Planning enables civic leaders, business interests, and citizens to play a meaningful role in creating communities that enrich people’s lives,” and expect them to believe you. Rather, you will need to cultivate the views and opinions of these local officials in such a way that they will eventually come to this understanding of planning on their own.

### 3.4.3

**Cordial relations—even with those who oppose your work—lead to trust and respect**

### 3.4.4

**An alternate strategy for approaching recalcitrant officials involves asking a different question**

### 3.4.5

**Over time, planners can help decision makers see the benefits of planning for themselves**

It's important to get to know your local officials as human beings. Often, building trust can be done as easily over a discussion about grandchildren as it can over a discussion about a neighborhood plan, transit, or open space.

### 3.5 Developing and delivering a winning message

Once you've finished assessing the political structure and context of your community, think about the message you want to deliver. In addition to suggestions discussed in Sections 2.2 and 2.3 of this Guide, it's important to remember that successful messages put context ahead of the details of what you actually say. This is especially true when addressing local officials. Unfortunately, many times planners focus on the details of their plans—complete with maps, projections, and technical jargon—without understanding that this is either incomprehensible or, worse, irritating to the officials with whom they are meeting. Consider the perspective of Seminole County, Florida, Commissioner Randall Morris:

#### 3.5.1

**Make presentations easy to understand; avoid using planning jargon**

*"The most frustrating part of an elected official's job is to listen to a presentation from a group of engineers, planners, or other highly technical individuals, who use their own language, often filled with acronyms, technical terms, and other professional forms of communication. These dynamics tend to create an environment that can prevent elected officials from taking a proverbial leap-of-faith to acceptance."<sup>17</sup>*



Seminole County Government

Avoid using technical jargon while talking to audiences, a rule that is especially important to follow with elected officials, says Seminole County, Florida, Commissioner Randall Morris (at podium).

Determining what resonates with elected officials will vary widely among officials and communities. While there are no "cookie-cutter" approaches to finding messages that resonate, several points upon which most elected officials can agree are:

#### 3.5.2

**Messages geared towards citizen concerns, the economy, and quality of life resonate with elected officials**

- They want to address the concerns and needs of constituents. The first and foremost goal of most local officials and elected officials in particular is to be responsive to those who elected him or her to office. This means planners must be prepared to answer questions about the view of the community whenever speaking with a local official.
- They want to ensure economic development and vitality. Regardless of whether they are conservative or liberal, supportive of planning or not, most local officials want to ensure the continued economic vitality of the area they represent. Hence, planners need to be prepared to answer questions about how a particular plan will benefit the community economically.
- They want to ensure quality of life. Every local official defines quality of life differently, and their definitions often are related directly to the kinds of people

and interests they represent. More conservative and development-oriented officials will define “quality of life” as ensuring that citizens have access to all kinds of amenities, including big box retail. Another official may define “quality of life” as access to open space and parks. Knowing how the local official you are talking to defines quality of life, as well as how the proposal meets that definition, will be critical to your success.

The three messages APA has developed fit closely with the concerns of local officials. For example, just as elected officials are concerned about ensuring economic development and vitality, planners can make the point that “good planning creates communities that offer better choices for where and how people work and live.” This argument can be made whether the discussion is about zoning decisions that promote downtown business development or efforts to attract new businesses through investments in transportation infrastructure, brownfields restoration, or downtown revitalization.



Bay Communications

Walking tours are an excellent way to show elected and appointed officials as well as stakeholders and engaged citizens the benefits and value of planning. The tour shown here took place at APA's 2005 National Planning Conference in San Francisco.

In order for messages to interest local officials positively, use what resonates with them. Show benefits and tell a story with words and pictures to which your officials can relate. One of the most effective ways to do this is to show local officials results in communities where similar efforts were undertaken. Trips to other communities and walking or bus tours of your own community can help bring the vision alive. Such trips helped build support for an effective and long-term planning program in Chattanooga,

Tennessee.<sup>18</sup> Points out Gary Ridley, director of the Oklahoma Department of Transportation, during a recent tour in Collinsville, Oklahoma: “[I]t’s always helpful to see something on the ground... [i]t’s difficult to visualize the opportunity and the improvements that can be made in a community without looking at it first hand.”<sup>19</sup>

As with any other audience, recitations of growth projections and technical planning terms and concepts are not nearly as compelling to local officials as anecdotes, stories, and pictures. Always think about how you can make your point visually. Members of the North Carolina Chapter of APA (NCAPA) recognized this when they used pictures to underscore the adverse impacts of billboards to communities across the state:

The North Carolina state legislature was considering a bill to limit the ability of local officials to phase out non-conforming billboards. Through pictures and carefully crafted communications pieces, NCAPA demonstrated to policy makers the strikingly positive difference that phasing out certain billboards had made in the quality of life for communities that had been able to do so.

### 3.5.3

**Focus on benefits and positive outcomes**

### 3.5.4

**Use pictures to make your points**

To drive home its message to the media, a news conference was held in an area where billboards had been removed and replaced with beautifully landscaped trees. Also shown at the media event were “before and after” pictures.<sup>20</sup>

Since a number of different people are likely to speak on planning issues in your community, it is important to think strategically about who are the best people to deliver your carefully crafted messages. Depending on the circumstances, it may be



North Carolina Chapter of the American Planning Association

APA North Carolina Chapter President Bill Duston, AICP (center), with legislative Chair Ben Hitchings, AICP (right), during an April 2004 press event.

the planning director or other planning department staff member, a local official who is a champion for planning issues, or another partner or ally of the planning department. Be sure to bear in mind any local restrictions on communicating with local officials. If there are any partial or complete bans on direct communication, planners should work closely with coalition partners and other allies to ensure the message is communicated effectively and legally.

### 3.5.5

**Technical information often is best delivered from a planning director**

**Planning director or individual planners.** Sometimes the positive planning message is best delivered to local officials from the planning department, often the planning director. This is particularly true when the issues being discussed are very technical in nature or when the interaction is somewhat formal. For example, members of the city council or county commission may ask the planning department for its formal recommendations on the best approach to a particular situation. Or they might ask a planner with expertise in transportation to make recommendations on providing safe routes for children to ride their bikes to school. The planning director or planners in the department also can be useful in delivering messages to local officials when the director or planning staff member has, over time, developed positive relationships with the officials.

### 3.5.6

**Stakeholders who share a vision with planners make strong spokespeople**

**Stakeholders.** Local citizens and business leaders can be tremendous allies in delivering the message to local officials. This is particularly true when a stakeholder who understands the benefits of planning also has a positive relationship with, and shares the perspective of, a local official. Efforts in Denver to pass the FasTracks initiative, a 12-year, \$4.7 billion plan to bring light rail to the community, included business leaders working with conservative local officials to gain their support for the measure. As a result, the initiative was actively supported by all 31 metro mayors and the vast majority of local officials. It was approved by a 57 percent margin. Stakeholders, in this case the hundreds of business leaders supporting the plan, made the difference in getting more conservative local officials on board.<sup>21</sup>

**Local official as champion.** Finally, in situations where a trusted local official shares the planner’s perspective, that local official might be the best person to deliver the



Regional Transportation District of Denver

Business leaders were critical allies in efforts to garner support of elected officials for FasTracks, Denver's light rail system.

message to his or her colleagues. This approach can be particularly useful when handling a divisive situation or one in which those who support good planning might be in the minority. Hearing the message from their fellow elected officials increases the likelihood that it will resonate. In addition, the local official will have more opportunities for interaction, both formal and informal, with his or her colleagues, ensuring that the planning message is continuously reinforced.

To be successful, it also is important to consider the venue in which you or your spokesperson will be speaking. The planning message can be delivered in a variety of venues, from formal situations to more informal settings. In formal situations, such as city council hearings, press conferences, town hall meetings, and zoning commission hearings, anything said generally will be “for the record.” Consider your approach accordingly.

Informal venues include day-to-day communications with local officials and their staff, community meetings with stakeholders and constituents—even your interactions at the local grocery store! Three distinctions are noteworthy whether the situation is formal or informal:

- **Reactive and proactive.** One type is not necessarily better than the other. Reactive messages are prompted by a situation or circumstances requiring a response. Proactive messages involve those where the planner is taking the initiative to bring up a particular topic or issue, not someone else. APA's three messages are meant to be proactive, although they can be used in reactive situations as well.

Officials in Manchester, New Hampshire, were proactive when talking about efforts to promote continued economic development in the community. According to Mayor Robert Baines, “We want good strategic planning so we have a blueprint for success... We have a great opportunity, and we want to make sure we do it right.”<sup>22</sup>

- **Official versus unofficial.** Will the interaction be an official part of the record or part of an ongoing, informal effort to build trust? Public hearings, for example are more



Manchester Office of the Mayor

Manchester, New Hampshire, Mayor Robert Baines (at podium).

### 3.5.7

**Local officials with a shared perspective are helpful when facing an uphill battle**

### 3.5.8

**Take into account whether the setting is formal or informal**

### 3.5.9

**Three considerations for choosing proper delivery and timing of messages**

formal on-the-record situations in which planners may find themselves, whereas community meetings might be considered less formal.

- **Specific versus general.** This distinction may seem obvious, but it has tremendous bearing on a planner's ability to engage local officials. Because much of their time is spent on matters requiring immediate attention, officials are likely to pay closer attention to messages focused on specific projects.

You will get the most interest from local officials when major planning decisions must be made. Don't expect general messages about planning to be immediately understood—or even heard. You should not abandon efforts to develop and deliver messages about the long-term benefits and value of planning. Use the broad themes in your core messages to build sub-messages tailored to specific situations and circumstances that will result in something occurring in the present. For example, in working with local officials on whether to support a specific zoning change at the next day's meeting, frame your message in terms of how that particular zoning change will serve to promote better quality of life or offer more choices to citizens.

### 3.6 Using persistence and repetition

Planners know that the task of creating livable communities is measured in decades, not years. Likewise, planners should expect to work with local officials over an extended period of time before seeing results. The benefits of good planning will not be noticed or believed in the course of a few months, and local officials (as well as citizens) need time to understand how your proposal will benefit the community.

Commissioner Ron Stewart from Boulder, Colorado, who received an APA Distinguished Leadership Award in 2005, recognizes this. He worked for 15 years to pass in 1993 a twice-defeated ballot initiative that increased the local sales tax in order to help fund open space acquisitions.<sup>23</sup> If Commissioner Stewart had given up after the first attempt, Boulder would not have the reputation it has today for green space and an enhanced quality of life.



Photo courtesy Ron Stewart

Boulder County, Colorado,  
Commissioner Ron Stewart.

Be cognizant of the fact that due to elections and reapportionments, the local officials with whom you work will change over time. Constant repetition and an ongoing presence are necessary to bring these new individuals into the fold.

Authors and planners Norman Krumholz, FAICP, and Pierre Clavel recall how, in the early 1990s, Ken Grimes, then a senior planning analyst with the San Diego Housing Commission, conceived of the need for a housing trust fund. Initially rejected by the San Diego City Council, the proposal was reintroduced and enthusiastically adopted after several new council members took office.<sup>24</sup>

#### 3.6.1

#### Persistence and repetition pay off for planners in San Diego

## Massachusetts Planning Reform Gains Ground

For more than a decade, planners and their allies in Massachusetts have been working to reform the state's antiquated land-use laws. Efforts in 2005 culminated in June when a six-hour, standing-room-only hearing was held before a state legislative committee on a proposed reform bill. A news release issued after the hearing featured quotes by Peter C. Lowitt, AICP, president of the Massachusetts Chapter of the American Planning Association (MAPA). The release led to editorials in several newspapers in the state endorsing the planner-supported measure, the Massachusetts Land Use Reform Act (<http://www.massmunilaw.org/zoningart.htm?cid=2353>).

How this milestone was reached dates to 1999 when eight groups—including MAPA—established the Zoning Reform Working Group to advise the legislature on proposed changes to the state's enabling laws for planning, including the Zoning Act and Subdivision Control Law.

Many of the zoning reform group's products—press releases, PowerPoint presentations, and testimony—rely on facts and figures provided by MAPA and its national organization, APA. "Did you know," reads a PowerPoint presentation script, that "the American Planning Association lists Massachusetts as one of the states with the most outdated land-use laws?" (See <http://www.massmunilaw.org/zoningart.htm?cid=2353>.)

Following a successful effort to amend the state's Zoning Act so that cluster developments no longer require a special permit, the zoning reform group realized that additional progress was contingent upon establishing broad support within the state. In 2001, the Coalition for Zoning Reform—which today boasts more than 130 members—emerged to advocate for issues identified by the Zoning Reform Working Group. (See <http://www.massmunilaw.org/zoning.htm?sid=60>.)

Introduction of the Massachusetts Land Use Reform Act in the state House and Senate during the 2003-04 legislative session gave the reform coalition the timely development it needed to raise public awareness about the limitations state laws place on communities wanting to plan for smart growth. For instance, how the state's lenient "grandfathering" protection laws undermine zoning reforms or how other laws allow for unlimited creation of building lots along roads without going through any subdivision review.



Courtesy Massachusetts Chapter APA

Massachusetts state legislators, planners, and members of a statewide Land Use Reform Coalition on the steps of the statehouse in Boston prior to a legislative hearing in June, 2005.

### 3.6.2

**Planners and their allies are working with state legislators in Massachusetts to modernize planning laws so communities can implement smart growth measures**

### 3.6.3

**Essential to adopting planning and zoning law reforms are public awareness and public support**

**3.6.4**  
**First-hand testimony**  
**from planners**  
**speaking at a June**  
**2005 legislative**  
**hearing was essen-**  
**tial to bringing the**  
**subject to life for**  
**decision-makers**

Working in tandem with the Zoning Reform Working Group, MAPA began encouraging its members to join the Coalition for Zoning Reform and to voice the planning community's support for land-use reform. Twice in 2003, for example, MAPA wrote letters to the editor of *The Boston Globe* correcting misinformation and documenting the need for specific changes. To make the chapter's letters effective, Lowitt used local examples ("The City of Taunton provides but one example of how liberal 'grandfathering' provisions contained in our state zoning laws hindered an effort to curb sprawl.") and a conversational writing style ("This kind of plan-busting is unprecedented in other states"). (See <http://www.massapa.org/articles.htm>.)



Courtesy Massachusetts Chapter APA

Members of the Massachusetts Land Use Reform Coalition meet with state representative Stephen Kulik, seated second from right, to discuss a legislation designed to modernize the state's planning laws.

planners to "...use illustrative stories from your community with which you have firsthand knowledge. Make it personal and relevant to the quality of life in your town. The shortcomings of Massachusetts' current land-use laws may not be evident to the uninitiated, so it is your challenge to bring the subject alive for committee members."

MAPA is continuing its efforts with the zoning reform coalition and the reform working group to secure passage of a land-use bill that allows communities in Massachusetts to effectively plan for and practice smart growth.

Reintroduced in 2005, the Massachusetts Land Use Reform Act became the primary focus of the chapter's legislative activities. As the date for a joint committee hearing approached in June, the zoning reform coalition and MAPA worked not just to pack the hearing room, but also to identify local planners with stories to tell about how reform would improve their communities. In its guidelines for testifying, the coalition urged planners to

Being persistent, however, doesn't mean pestering. Bear in mind that most local officials are defined by the decisions they make. As such, they tend to focus on decision points in the process. Asking for meetings on an ongoing basis in which you discuss nothing but the generic benefits of planning is a waste of your time and theirs. Instead, consider how you can develop a plan for carefully crafted, ongoing interactions that relate specifically to issues in the community—and you'll be on your way to becoming one of the local officials' most trusted advisors.

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