

Training the Decision-Makers

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The decision-makers in our communities are the Legislative Boards, Planning Boards, Zoning Board of Appeals and various advisory groups. They are generally well-intentioned citizens who have politically or voluntarily decided to serve their communities. They are usually underpaid for their services and live the life of a hockey goalie. No matter how many saves they make, it's the one that got through, that lost the game, everyone remembers. Many communities are finding it increasingly difficult to fill positions on decision-making boards. Often they are putting ads in the newspaper! The demands on these individuals' time and knowledge are far greater than they were only 10-20 years ago. Personal and job mobility has also changed a lot of individuals views on commitment to the communities they live in. Turnover and loss of continuity on decision-making boards is now a very serious issue that goes to the heart of the need for education. I recently completed a project that took, the typical, two years to obtain approval from a planning board. In that time, the entire board "turned over" with the exception of the chairperson!

The decisions made in our communities often involve large monetary issues, developers' risk, growth issues, and long-term effects on the environment, etc. Yet, there are very few Political Science graduates on our Legislative Boards and very few engineers, planners, environmental technicians, architects, etc., on our Planning Boards. Unfortunately, we find an increasing number of decision-makers that can't even interpret or understand the design plans and technical information submitted for an approval process. So, how do we establish baseline standards for putting people in these decision-making positions and provide them with the knowledge to do their jobs?

First, we have to stop trying to train these people about the chapter/verse legalities and get back to training them on how to review facts and information to make a decision. We spend far too much time on training programs that concentrate on procedures, deadlines, legalities, case law and the legal consequences of their decisions. Many well-intentioned volunteers are discouraged by the emphasis on these issues that detract from what they felt they were put in position to do. We need to teach them how to read plans, what "Level of Service" means, modern best management practices for stormwater management, what "density" really means, what incentive zoning is, that clustering is a good planning tool, etc.

Second, we need to reprioritize some community budgets to emphasize training on planning issues. One of the most valuable resources for decision-based training is the New York Planning Federation's annual conference. Yet, attendance is down, due largely to budget cutbacks, in a time when the education is needed more than ever! Community training and education needs to be an ongoing budgeted and funded priority that includes the entire public, not just the decision makers. In the spirit of Quality Communities, the decision makers are actually everyone in the community. With more broad-based community education on growth and development issues, finding volunteers to sit on decision-making boards should be easier.

Third, our building industry has to take a more active roll in the training and education process. We also need to seek positions on decision-making boards. Get involved in your communities! Recommend, help organize and participate in community education programs. Volunteer to be on growth management and comprehensive plan committees to make sure our perspective is part of the education process. The worst time to educate decision-making boards, or the public, is during the heat of battle on a controversial project.

The Monroe County Department of Planning and Economic Development offers one of the best training programs in our state. I helped develop the program and have been part of the faculty for 12 years. Communities routinely send new decision making board members and staff members. The program consists of about 10 topics/sessions including: powers/duties, SEQR, drainage, traffic, how to read plans and planning tools. Sessions are video taped for additional use by communities. It concludes with a mock board meeting and site visits to view examples of issues learned. The program has trained over 600 decision makers in our area. It would make a great model for a statewide program.

If we are unable to improve on the training of our decision makers, we will see an increase in bad decisions made for the wrong reasons. Decisions like a positive declaration because it's an election year and a group of neighbors signed a petition against the project, even though all project reviews indicated no significance! Actions like a 40 page scoping document copied from a nearby project so the community can be "consistent" in its treatment of developers, with no decision process on significance of the specific project impacts. Decisions made based on the fear of being sued rather than on the merits of the design.

I miss the days when decision makers asked me questions that indicated they actually reviewed the plans and reports I prepared. I remember a board member once asking me for the name of the scientist and formula that I based my analysis on. I answered his question and he made the motion to approve the project. Oh, the good old days!