

Public Documents, Public Readers...

Creating Public Information the Public Can Read

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When we first planned the initial year of *The Community Planner*, we decided the third issue should focus on public information, a broad topic that covers a multitude of sins. Our initial idea was to focus on the tools of public information; however, as we talked to the contributors for the issue, most notably Niki King, we took a step back, re-evaluated the content, and refocused the issue on communication. While the issue still includes some of the tools, the broader coverage of tools will wait until a future issue.

There is nothing, perhaps, more infuriating than having to slog through bureaucratic English or plannerese, especially when reference points have been omitted or the language is so convoluted that you lose the gist of the sentence by the third line. We have all had those moments, while reading a document, when we've thought "where did this person learn to write," or "what?" Unfortunately, those moments seem to occur far too often in public documents, whether a white paper report, a staff analysis, a press release, a plan, or, most especially, an ordinance.

Once a year, I help out with a technical review committee, charged with evaluating writing projects from recent graduates from one of our local universities and once a year I am appalled at the quality of writing produced by graduate students. The problem is that they are not the exception. Government documents are littered with the remains of the English Language.

Our lead article, in this issue focuses on the Plain Language Movement and the art of writing. Late in 2010, Barack Obama signed the Plain Language Act into law, completing at least part of the language-based crusade started by George Orwell and Maury Maverick. The first part of the article recounts the long history of the fight for clarity in government documents; the second part discusses writing and the nature of plain language.

One of my favorite articles in this issue is from Niki King, a reporter and a planner by training. Niki currently covers government and planning stories, as well as the Kentucky Derby, for *Louisville Courier-Journal*. Not only is Niki's article entertaining, but she offers some sound advice on working with the press.

This issue also sees a second new voice in the fray--Carol Lindstrom. Although Carol's training is in a field far removed from planning (naturopathic nutrition), her avocation in recent years has been as an "open government" advocate and FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) practitioner. In 2009, nominated by staff at the *Roanoke Times*, Carol won the Lawrence E. Richardson Award from the Virginia Coalition for Open Government.

Diane Zahm returns to the pages of the Community Planner with an excellent "Tools of the Trade" article on the use of "slideware," including the use of Powerpoint. In her article, she talks about the different schools of thought in terms of presentation design and provides access to a broad variety of online resources. A second "Tool of the Trade" article, dealing with writing press releases, also appears in this issue, as does the third installment in the "comprehensive plan" series we started in the first issue.

We hope you enjoy this issue.

