

Getting beyond the Legalese...

Planning and the Press

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I've been a reporter at papers of varying sizes, covering a myriad of planning issues for almost a decade. Now, I cover eastern Jefferson County for The Courier-Journal, in Louisville, Ky., our state's largest newspaper and media company.

The east end is, as the say in planning parlance, the 'favored quarter' of our city. It's the most prosperous and fast-growing, which means it faces the most intense development pressures. I'm constantly trying to keep up with the steady stream of proposals for new subdivisions, commercial, office and retail spaces.

I rely on our Metro Department of Planning and Design Services to inform me of these proposed changes, so I can, in turn, inform the public. In some ways, the department works well with the press. They have a full-time public information officer, who schedules interviews, hunts down information and fills Freedom of Information requests. And the department has a routine means of distributing information about proposals and public meetings beyond the required legal notices in newspapers. These are practices I would recommend for any planning department.

The Legal Trap: Limiting Effectiveness

But there's some real room for improvement too. Details such as the name of the developer on a project, the name of a store, or expected tenant-- the information the public would want to know most-- is annoyingly difficult to get. Another hardship is trying to get planners to describe the possible impact of a development to the public, or explain the mission and intent of a plan they've created and how it's meant to be of service to the community.

Part of the problem is that planners are fearful of overstepping their legal boundaries, of jeopardizing their legal requirements to be objective technicians. So, they err on the side of caution. They choose to give as little information as possible. And, when they do actually communicate, it's presented in such legalese and technical jargon that's nearly impossible for the public, or the press, to discern.

It is, to me, an interesting and circular irony, that the community planning process is bound by law to inform the public. And yet, the process is so overly based on meeting the legal requirements, it doesn't satisfy the initial goal of communicating with the public.

For example, the planning department allows people to get updates about proposals and public meetings by zip code via direct mail or emails. I get updates for the area that I cover. When they come, they give the date for the public meeting, the address of the property, and the name of the planner assigned to the case. That's all helpful. What is not helpful is the reason why the meeting is to occur. Here's one I recently received:

"You are invited to attend a review of a proposal for General Plan binding element amendment, Revised Detailed District Development Plan, and Land Development Code waiver."

I've completed master's coursework in community development, and I don't know what that means. The general public wouldn't either, and I can't, by my own industry standards, print anything the general public wouldn't understand.

So I have to call the case manager. I find out the meeting is for a request from Beverage Warehouse, a liquor store, to move from one location in a shopping mall to another. Why didn't it just say that to begin with?

I'm told by the planners that the legal council advises them to be as vague as possible, because the proposal could change. And if it's different than what they advertise, they have to advertise it again. I find that frustrating. If the point is to inform the public, then we should have all the information to begin with.

Another example, I covered a plan the department put forth for a mixed-use suburban "town center." The plan covered 123 acres and accounted for 10 development proposals, including a hotel, big box store, condos, expansion of a large church and the construction of a major thoroughfare. The plan's design standards called for unified building materials and signs, open green spaces with amenities such as park benches and fountains, and an internal system of tree-lined, pedestrian-friendly roads and sidewalks and bike lanes. Because I have the background that I do, I understand the intent of such a plan is to bring separate, individual proposals into one, holistic plan that accounts for cars and pedestrian alike.

But newspaper journalism standards require reporters to tell stories using the words of others, the words of those telling the story. So, I did countless interviews with the planners. But, they all had trouble relaying the mission, scope and intent of the project. They spouted off more jargon. It was like trying to get a computer to tell a story. I understand they didn't want to say anything that could be misconstrued as judgement about the project. It's their job to reserve judgement for the planning commission.

Still, you would think that if so much thought would be put into such a large project, some overtures would be made to communicate about it.

It frankly made my job all the more difficult.

Improving Communications

Communicating with the press is much like communicating with the general public. You need to be clear, specific and use language that everyone can understand. And don't let your legal council dictate how you communicate. Lawyers have their own reasons for doing things and communicating clearly isn't usually one of them.

Here are some quick pointers that should be applicable for any community planner, regardless of the size of the department or community:

Establishing a Communications Process. Set up a good process for communicating with the public. The legal requirement is to place a notice in the newspaper for every public meeting, but that's not enough. No one reads those notices. Email list serves, direct mail and web updates are all good methods.

Build a Relationship with the Local Press. Include the press in whatever routine is established. Put your local newspaper, T.V. and radio stations on the list so they receive the same information the public does.

Create Effective Tools, including Press Releases. For events that you really want coverage of, like a public meeting for a new comprehensive plan, email the press outlets a press release. Include all pertinent information about where the meeting is, what day and time and what the meeting will cover. Tell why the meeting is important for the community. Give contact information for

a person who can speak about the project.

Be Available. When the press does call, be available. All people in the press work on tight deadlines. Don't keep them waiting or you won't like the final product. All the information you would have liked to have conveyed won't be there, or worse yet, the reporter will smack you with a sentence like "So and so was not available for comment Friday."

Be Prepare. Journalists want the information they think is most important to readers, and they want background. They're not technicians, so tell them about the plan or project like you'd tell your neighbor, or your friend. Use layman language. Before the interview, think of major points you may want to illustrate. Get the major facts in front of you, so you're prepared.

Don't Hide or Avoid Issues. In the event that something is controversial, as land use decisions often can be, speak your position openly and honestly. Don't clam up, that can exacerbate the issue.



Niki King is a professional journalist, and currently works as a reporter for the Louisville Courier-Journal. In addition to working in Louisville, Ms. King has also worked as a reporter at the Roanoke Times (Virginia) and the Kitsap Sun (Washington) Niki has a BA in Journalism from the University of Memphis and is working on her Masters in Community and Leadership Development at the University of Kentucky, which gives her a unique understanding of the relationship between government and the press. We welcome Niki to the pages of the Community Planner and look forward to her future contributions on politics, planning, and press relations.