

The Next Generation of Your Planning Commission

by Kit Hodge

As planners, you have spent a great deal of time thinking about what your town or city should look like in five, ten, twenty years. But have you ever wondered what the planning commission itself will look like in the future? Will you have new, younger members – drawn from those in your community now in their 20s and 30s – who will be able to continue the great work of the commission well into the future?

The easiest way to ensure your legacy is to attract younger residents to be a part of the commission, either as members or as active volunteers. Need more incentive? Adding a younger perspective to your commission will probably also benefit your economic development efforts.

The roughly 79 million Americans born between 1966 and 1985 are rapidly redefining the economic geography of the country; they tend to cluster in the same locations, and have a large impact on the future viability of the local economy. Many cities and towns are either trying to attract and retain or to manage huge influxes of this coveted new generation of residents. They are the future

that will continue to make your city and town a great place to live and do business.

But plugging in younger residents can be easier said than done. Younger Americans are notorious for being addicted to the Internet and shy to meet in person. So if you're used to reaching people through print newsletters and public meetings, you'll need to adjust your approach. Here are some basic to advanced tips for attracting younger members and participants to your planning commission:

1. **Basic: Make a commitment.** Designate a point person or subcommittee of your commission to create a plan for attracting and engaging residents in their 20s and 30s. Then follow through, and give feedback on progress made to the full commission.

2. **Basic: Be completely online and interactive.** Putting all of your content and proceedings online is an absolute minimum requirement of suc-

cessful outreach. Most importantly, you should create and market opportunities to provide feedback on planning commission issues through your Web site, blog, and e-mail list. Younger residents want to stay in the loop and provide feedback, but the traditional public forum setting often makes no sense to them.

- **Web site.** Up-to-date meeting announcements, notes, reports, newsletters, and other content should all be in an accessible format on your Web site.

- **Blog.** If you are hard pressed for money to create a Web site from scratch, use Blogger or other free blogging programs to post your content in a blog format. There are a myriad of free Web tools that let you post and link to documents online, from Google Documents to Slideshare.net, so you can link to them on your blog or Web site. Make sure you allow comments on your blog. Finally, don't forget to give the commission a human face. Profile the people on the

continued on page 4

"I think it's critical to get a broad-spectrum of citizen representatives on planning boards. Among the best ways to attract Gen Xers (myself included) and others:

- Pay them for their time away from work. This will help attract people with kids, family, and jobs. How about pay the employer for their time away from work? It isn't jury duty, but I would argue it's just as important to society.

- Have the mayor/commission chair contact employers to emphasize how important it is to get a broad spectrum of citizens on these boards in an attempt to make it easier for people that have jobs and are young to not only apply, but be able to attend hearings/meetings.

- Propose a process that does not simply give each elected official the option of picking a friend for a commission or board. Accept applications from all, create an eligibility list based on rationale criteria lump them together and have a lottery!"

– B. Scott Bernhart, AICP, Lake Havasu City, Arizona

"How do you attract younger commissioners?"

1. Ask them. It may just be the places I choose to live, but my last three hometowns had younger (late-20s/early to mid-30s) planning commissioners. I think in all cases it was just a matter of seeing who the young folks were who attended meetings, or otherwise figuring out who was already civically involved, and then asking them if they'd considered serving on a board or commission.

2. Consider shorter appointment terms. Not too many years ago, when I was in grad school, around age 24, a couple of city council members approached me about serving on the planning commission. I considered it, but couldn't commit to the three-year term, as whether or not I'd be around in three years (I wanted to be) was going to depend on whether my wife and I could find jobs locally.

3. Publicize what the planning commission is and what it does. People in general have an ignorance as to how government works; older people have probably at least had the chance to get to know the people in government, and learn how it works that way, but the younger types will probably need a little education. (Besides, your town, like all towns, could probably benefit from a little 'why planning matters' push.)"

– Richard Murphy, Ypsilanti, Michigan



The Next Generation...

continued from page 3

commission and add videos about the commission or specific issues.

- *E-mail list.* Send out regular e-mails with important announcements, including prominent notices about upcoming events, and opportunities for feedback in the form of polls or questionnaires.

3. **Basic Plus: Market your Web site/blog/e-mail list.** Just creating your Web site or blog isn't enough. You need

to market it to sites that attract younger residents:

- *Outside.in.* This increasingly popular Web site aggregates blog posts by location, so users can find news about their town based on their zip code or town name. Add your blog to this Web site. Other bloggers and print journalists sometimes use this tool to develop their own stories.

- *Facebook and mySpace.* Create a Facebook and mySpace profile for your commission. These are wildly popular "social networking" Web sites, where millions of

Americans – particularly young Americans – share information with and network with each other. It's a built-in distribution network. Post the new content that you add to your Web site, blog, and e-mail list to your Facebook page. Also, check out the "Neighborhoods" application within Facebook, which allows you to add information about neighborhood resources. Advertise your Facebook and mySpace pages on your Web site, blog, and e-mail list to build up your "friends."

- *Bloggers.* E-mail and meet with the individuals behind the blogs about life in your town – if any – written by residents in their 20s and 30s. If the bloggers are

"The age range on our 17-member Commission is from 35 to 68 with the median being somewhere in the 50s. Older board members like to receive detailed information on upcoming decisions at least a week in advance of any meeting. They then like to discuss the information in person although they may e-mail questions to the office prior to the meeting.

Younger members appear to receive and process information quickly, frequently providing their personal view via e-mail without showing too great a need to discuss the topic in person.

Bottom-line, we are just beginning to take note of age divisions on the board and staff and just how those divisions impact our operation."

— John R. Cyr, Executive Director, North Central Regional Planning Commission, Beloit, Kansas

"I think there are some significant differences between Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers. (I'm going to generalize, so what I'll note is certainly not true in all cases):

1. Gen-Xers tend to be interested in representing the needs and views of the community, and are more likely to employ community involvement methods to making decisions. Baby Boomers tend to make decisions based upon their own beliefs and understanding of what will benefit the community, and place less emphasis on finding that common community thread.

2. Gen-Xers tend to be interested in a wider breadth of issues related to community planning and how the community competes, compares, and functions on a regional, national, or global level. Baby Boomers tend to focus on issues within the immediate community.

3. Gen-Xers tend to bring new and innovative ideas to the table to create a community's sense of place such as the development of vibrant meeting places, updated libraries, performance space, kid friendly events, updated downtowns, etc. Baby Boomers tend to focus on generating economic development that provides jobs and income to a community, even at the expense of community character.

Overall, a successful community will utilize Baby Boomer knowledge to manage the current needs of the community, with opportunities for Gen-Xers to work toward a vision of the community they will inherit, and to tap into that Baby Boomer knowledge to make it happen."

— Brian Simmert, AICP, Planner, Barneveld, Wisconsin

"Often people only involve themselves if they know of the topic or feel passionately about the issue. Communities should work harder to educate average citizens about the true implications of issues. To enhance the education of younger people, it will take creative measures. TV channels such as Current and MTV are used to bring messages to the youth. Web 2.0 technology is being used in the political arena with much success. Communities must now do the same thing.

... People also want to go places where they feel comfortable. Public meetings are like this. People will go if they feel safe, comfortable, and within a friendly atmosphere. We as a community need to work to make the 'town meeting' or the 'planning commission' meetings we all love cool again. Make it the normal thing to do and seem like the abnormal thing to avoid it. It would take marketing, but also a shift toward a more inclusive form of democracy."

— Jon Slason, Burlington, Vermont

"Pay them. As a Gen Xer with two small children, I am unable to work full-time and volunteer on my city's planning commission or run for council. I can barely even make it to community visioning meetings and/or workshops. It's frustrating because I know I could add value, and in some cases legitimacy, to the local land use decision-making process but my family and job commitments make it impossible for me to do so.

Offer elected officials a salary and provide planning commissioners a decent stipend and the demographics of the boards would begin to shift. Easier said than done, right? Not necessarily. If planning commissioners were paid and the positions were actually sought after, performance and effectiveness measures could be applied to their service, expeditious and equitable land use decisions could be incentivized, and positive return to the community in the form of tangible economic development dollars could result. ... Conclusion: raise the bar on planning commission performance and effectiveness by implementing modest remuneration in return for their service."

— Patrick Wingard, AICP, Principal Planner, Clatsop County, Oregon





- *College young alumni groups.* Call the alumni offices of colleges that export a lot of people to your town and ask for the young alumni contact.

- *Sports groups.* Talk to the head of the local sports league and ask if you can distribute electronic or print information about hot issues at the commission to their players.

- *Dog owners.* Visit the dog runs in your town. It's a good place to meet many younger residents who have dogs, but may not have kids.

- *Major employers.* If there are major employers in town who employ a lot of younger residents, ask the employer if you can hold a lunch "meet and greet" (you - or the employer should provide free food) with their younger employees to talk about what's going on in the community.

If this seems like a long list to you, take heart. Some initial concerted effort will probably unearth a younger town resident or two who can take over outreach to her or his peers. Just remember that though we may come from different generations and are used to communicating in different ways – and perhaps have new ideas for town planning – we are ultimately all interested in the same thing: living in a great community of neighbors. ♦

Kit Hodge is the CEO of Neighbors Project, a non-profit that inspires and trains members of the new urban generation to connect with their



neighbors through projects that improve the neighborhood for everyone. To learn more: <Neighborsproject.org>.



writing about anything to do with your town already, then they probably would like to know about how decisions are made. By becoming a resource for them, you have a good chance of influencing them to report on what's happening on the commission. But don't expect them to tow the party line; they will ultimately write as they please.

4. **Advanced:** Meet with local representatives. Ask groups that attract young people in your city or town to make a plug for the commission's mailing list in their e-mails to their constituents. Be prepared to explain why your work is relevant to their particular interests.

A Conversation with Richard Florida



Editor's Note: Richard Florida is author of The Rise of the Creative Class, a fascinating look at what cities can do to succeed in today's competitive economy. One key for Florida, is tapping into "young creatives" and their energy. In light of Kit Hodge's article, I wanted to briefly explore with Florida what communities can do to attract and retain talented younger people.

Q. You talk about what you call the creative class, which includes many younger people such as Generation Xers. Why are attracting and retaining these young people important to communities that want to prosper?

A. It's simple. Talent attraction and retention is the defining issue for communities in the creative age.

Generation X, Y, and Millennials represent the future of the creative economy. They are more educated and mobile than ever; they demand a work-life balance and professional stimulation that is fulfilling and challenging. They focus on having and maintaining a high quality of life. Communities who can attract, retain, and meet the needs of the young creatives will prosper in the creative economy.

Q. Do Generation Xers who are part of the creative class bring different perspectives or desires than others about what's most important in terms of what cities provide?

A. More than ever before young creatives expect a high quality of life. Not all of their needs, desires, and expectations are the same. However, there are a few basic must-haves that a community must provide.

First, a community must provide the basics – a thick labor/ job market, access to affordable quality housing, and viable transit options, and so on.

Second, a place must be tolerant and accepting of all kinds of diversity – different racial and ethnic make ups, gays and lesbians, and alternative view points and perspectives. Creativity and creative talent – especially young talent – thrive in open environments.

Finally, communities must have a unique sense of place that's full with a menu of amenities and options which could be access to outdoors, a thriving arts scene or fantastic restaurants and nightlife. Not every community is the same; each place should strive to have a quality of place that's representative of its character and uniqueness. In my new book, *Who's Your City* I describe this in much more detail.

Q. What steps can cities take to engage members of the creative class in civic activities, including participation on local boards or other civic groups?

A. Young creatives are biting at the bit to be more civically engaged. I think you can see evidence of this in this year's primaries. For the first time in a long while, young people are turning out in massive numbers to participate in the political process. Communities can capitalize on this energy by reaching out to them for participation on local boards, commissions, and nonprofits. But to do this effectively, communities must show young creatives the difference they can make working on worthwhile and challenging projects and causes.

Civically engaging young talent is one of the best talent retention mechanisms out there. It's hard to leave a community where there are strong social and civic ties.

Note: Richard Florida's newest book, Who's Your City, focuses on why people choose to live where they do. In an early review for the Library Journal, Richard Drezen of the Washington Post called the book a "thought-provoking and seminal work [that] will surely be studied, not only by scholars but more importantly by consumers pondering a move."