

# HOW TO BE A GREAT PLANNING COMMISSIONER

Sonoma State University 35th Annual  
Planning Commissioners Conference  
December 1, 2018





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# ROLE OF PLANNING COMMISSIONS

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## Relationship to City Council

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**City Council**  
(Elected Body):

Sets policies and makes legislative decisions

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Decisions can be based on broader considerations (e.g. fiscal and political considerations)

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**Planning Commission**  
(Appointed Body):

Recommends and implements policies, zoning and design guidelines

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Decisions focused on conformance with land use policies and zoning ordinance

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**Common Objective:**

Alignment on community values and planning direction for the City

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Joint study sessions to promote policy agreement and clarify expectations

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# Purpose of Planning Commissions

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Police Power – protect and further public welfare of community

Advisory Body to City Council

- ✓ Advance Planning
- ✓ Policy Recommendations
- ✓ General Plan
- ✓ Specific and Area Plans
- ✓ Zoning Ordinance
- ✓ Design Guidelines

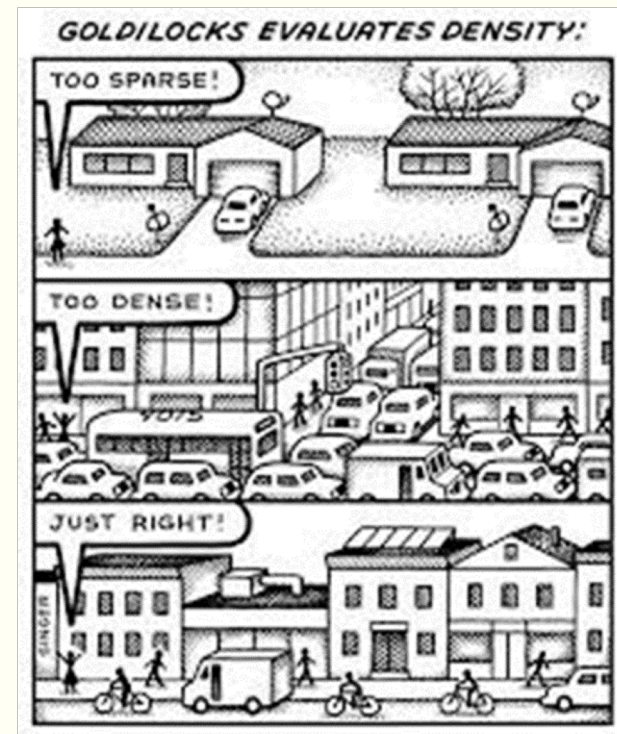
Quasi-Judicial Body

- ✓ Current Planning
- ✓ Development Review
- ✓ Discretionary Approvals
- ✓ Design Review
- ✓ Subdivision Maps
- ✓ Planning Director Appeals

## Balance Application of General Plan Policies

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- Quality of Life/Community Character
- Neighborhood Preservation/Community Growth
- Economic Development/Jobs
- Housing Supply/Affordability
- Transportation/Complete Streets
- Environmental Quality/Natural Resources
- Community Participation



## Understand CEQA Basics

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- Disclosure/information document vs. project approval/denial
- Identifies potential environmental impacts
- Identifies mitigation measures to reduce significant impacts
- Project vs. cumulative impacts
- Can still deny a project for other reasons
- Common vehicle for legal challenges





# PLANNING COMMISSIONER BEST PRACTICES

## Use Planning Staff as a Resource

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- Encourage staff recommendations
- Ask for technical assistance
- Seek excellence, not perfection
- Be respectful
- Recognize workload and priorities
- Provide constructive feedback



## Do Your Homework Prior to Meeting

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- Read staff report; ask questions
- Visit project site
- Focus on relevant land use/zoning criteria
- Weigh pros and cons
- Do not broadcast your opinion
- Explore potential conflicts of interest



## Practice Good Meeting Management

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- You are the face of the City
- Explain meeting procedures
- Stay on agenda
- Maintain meeting decorum
- Be civil to applicants and public
- Avoid blindsiding staff
- Facilitate community input
- Practice active listening



## Conduct Open and Transparent Deliberations

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- Ask only clarifying questions during public hearing
- Acknowledge public comments
- Disclose applicant and community contacts
- Respect and listen to fellow commissioners
- Seek consensus among commissioners
- Be open to modifying or compromising your position





## **Demonstrate Fair and Objective Decision-Making**

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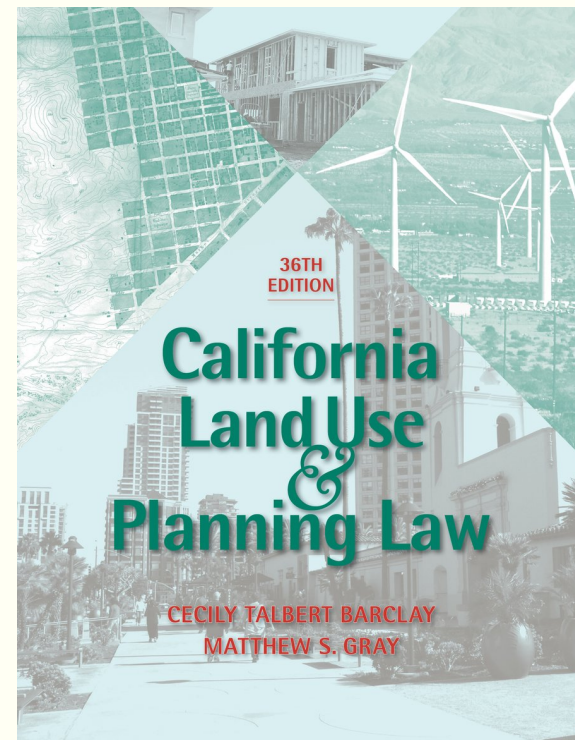
- Place priority on community values expressed in policy plans
- Recognize your personal biases and pre-conceptions
- Think big picture and long-term consequences
- Keep an open mind
- Balance different perspectives
- Practice critical thinking skills



## Establish Legal Basis for Commission Decisions

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- Conformance with General Plan policies
- Compliance with zoning standards
- Consistency with past decisions (avoid arbitrary and capricious decisions)
- Explain reasons for your vote
- Articulate findings for approval or denial



## Think Globally, Act Locally

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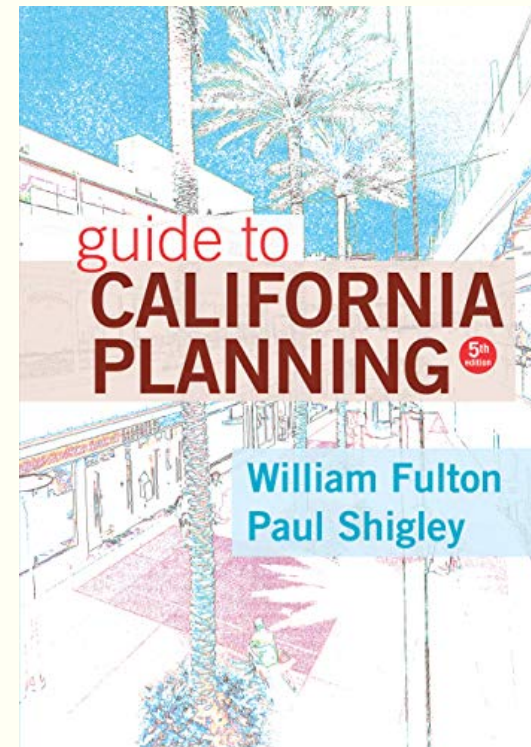
- Regional Responsibility
- Sustainable Development
- Smart Growth
- Affordable Housing
- Inclusive Community
- Environmental Quality



## Stay Informed on Planning Issues

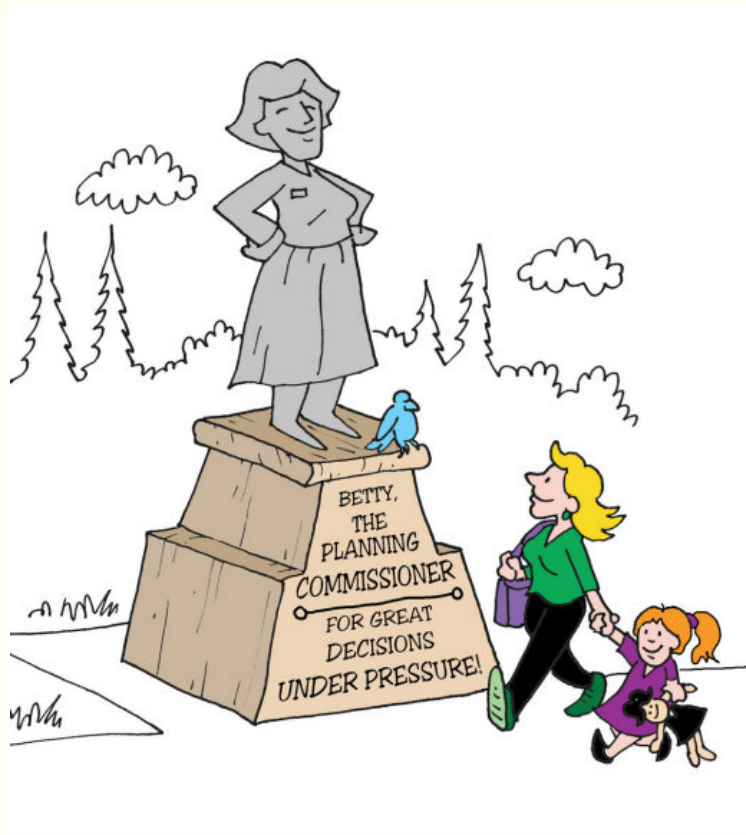
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- Institute of Local Government  
<https://www.ca-ilg.org/>
- Local Government Commission  
<https://www.lgc.org/>
- American Planning Association  
<https://www.planning.org/commissioners/>
- California Planning Roundtable  
<https://cproundtable.org/>
- Planners Web <http://plannersweb.com/>
- Planetizen <https://www.planetizen.com/>



## Discussion

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What Makes a Great  
Planning  
Commissioner?



# Urban Planners



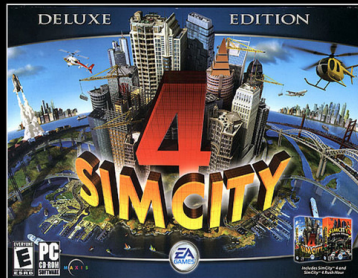
What We Think We Will Do



What The Public Thinks We Do



What Applicants Think We Do



What Our Friends Think We Do



What We Actually Do



What We Need To Do

Created by: John T.