

## **Planning Commission Roles and Advisory Activities**

The Planning Commission plays an important role in City government, working with and through the City Council to set a vision for the orderly development of the City through the Master Plan and its component planning documents, such as small area plans and citywide plans on topics such as housing, mobility, open space and the environment. Through these plans, and through regulating proposed development and public facilities, the Planning Commission must weigh a wide variety of City policies that either affect, or are affected by, the built environment. The Planning Commission is one of the few boards or commissions that have both a citywide and a multidisciplinary purview: issues that come before the Planning Commission routinely involve balancing competing and complimentary City policies.

Although there are some exceptions granted by the Charter, the Planning Commission most often provides an *advisory* function to City Council. The goal of this portion of the November 12, 2019 worksession with the Planning Commission and City Council is to review the various roles played by the Planning Commission, largely in service to the City Council, to ensure that the Planning Commission is meeting the Council's needs and expectations in its work.

There is a large volume of work that flows back and forth between the City Council and the Planning Commission, but the majority of that communication is indirect – through staff reports or individual interactions between Councilmembers and Commissioners. This worksession is a rare opportunity for the full membership of both bodies to discussion their joint work.

To facilitate that discussion, this memorandum will review the variety of the Planning Commission roles to date and suggest some potential questions to launch a conversation among Councilmembers and Commissioners.

### **Planning Commission Roles**

*Master Plans: small area plans, citywide master plan chapters (Housing, Transportation, etc), and master plan amendments. The Planning Commission must also find that the proposed Capital Improvements Program and sales, leases, and purchases of public land are consistent with the Master Plan.* The Planning Commission takes the lead in preparing a draft small area plans for Council consideration. Citywide plans are typically prepared under the guidance of other commissions (such as the Transportation Commission and the Transportation Master Plan) the responsibility of the Transportation Commission, but the Planning Commission also has a role, ensuring that these chapters are consistent with, and support, the City's land use and quality of life goals. One or more individual planning commissioners play an enhanced role in a particular small area plan – becoming experts in the plan and its issues, and reporting back to fellow commissioners on the plan's progress. When there is a formal advisory group for the plan, the Planning Commissioner typically is the chair. It's helpful during the Commission's deliberations to have one or more planning commissioners who are experts themselves on the plan, the plan process, and the range of perspectives on plan issues. In addition to participating in the planning process directly, staff holds worksessions with the Planning Commission and City Council at key points during the planning process to update public officials and receive

guidance.

*Plan Implementation:* many small area plans include as a chapter, or have as a follow-on task, the preparation of an implementation plan which determines the public facilities, infrastructure, and in some cases, affordable housing that is needed to support the proposed development; the cost of those facilities; and a plan for financing those facilities through a combination of developer contributions and public funds. In reviewing a proposed implementation strategy to provide guidance to the City Council, the Planning Commission typically focuses on the non-financial elements – such as whether the proposed sequencing of new development and public facilities, etc., will adequately achieve the plan’s goals throughout the implementation and not just at the end.

*City Policies/the Strategic Plan:* In general, the Planning Commission participates in the development of City policy documents to the extent that they are directed related to the preparation and interpretation of the Master Plan, or the regulation of development cases, non-development cases, or other matters clearly within the purview of the Planning Commission. A recent example is the Environmental Action Plan: the Planning Commission participated fully in the development of two of the chapters: *Green Building* and *Land Use and Open Space*. The Planning Commission similarly participated in the development of the City’s Strategic Plan with specific focus on those elements that are under its purview. The Planning Commission has generally avoided weighing in on financial or budgetary issues, although, for example, the recommended Green Building Policy contained a recommendation, accepted by City Council, that certain initiatives would require additional staff resources to be implemented.

*Zoning: text amendments and map amendments.* Text amendments are changes to the substance of the zoning ordinance affecting all properties in a particular zone. For example: allowing accessory dwelling units in residential zones would involve a text amendment. A map amendment changes the zoning for a particular property; for example, from R-8 to CRMU-M. In the case of zoning text amendments, the Planning Commission conducts thorough analysis of proposed text amendments in order to provide recommendations to the City Council. The Planning Commission’s extensive experience in the application of the zoning ordinance provides a basis for its consideration of staff’s suggested amendments. The Planning Commission also, from time to time, identifies elements of the ordinance that require attention in such areas as small business zoning, subdivisions, and others. These suggestions are added to staff’s text amendment work program, which is also shared with Council as part of the Long Range Planning Work Program. The Planning Commission evaluates recommended rezonings for consistency with the small area plan.

*Regulatory cases (advisory), including Development Special Use Permits, Special Use Permits, Vacations and Encroachments.* The majority of regulatory cases heard by the Planning Commission involve reviewing applicant proposals and staff recommendations as a precursor to developing the Commission’s recommendations for the Council’s consideration. As with any issue that comes before them, the Planning Commission periodically comes to a different conclusion than staff on regulatory cases, and these are communicated through the “Planning Commission Action” sections in the front of Council staff reports. Staff has not kept a scorecard, but staff’s impression is that Council gives the Planning Commission recommendation great

weight and often concurs with the Planning Commission recommendation, but not always.

*Regulatory cases that can be decided by the Planning Commission (unless appealed):*

*Subdivisions, development site plans.* Other than BAR Cases (which do not involve the Planning Commission), the regulatory cases most often appealed to the City Council are subdivisions and development site plans. Development site plans are projects that are considered “by right” development. Recent cases that have been appealed to City Council include the Karig Estates site plan and the Holly Street subdivision. The review of subdivisions and development site plans is considered “ministerial” in that the Planning Commission is to evaluate the proposal against clearly defined criteria in the ordinance. As both Commissioners and Councilmembers are aware, that does not mean there isn’t some judgment involved. When site plans subdivisions are appealed to the City Council, a planning commissioner attends to represent the Planning Commission’s judgment on the case.

*Long Range Planning Work Program:* The City Council adopts a *Long Range Planning Work Program* each year. The Planning Commission reviews and makes suggestions for the development of a draft work program. Often these are based on the Planning Commission’s experience developing plans or reviewing regulatory cases.

*Representation on Boards, Commissions, and Advisory Groups:* Planning Commissioners participate in the work of standing and *ad hoc* boards, commissions, working groups, and advisory groups. These include formal representation on bodies such as the Waterfront Commission, the Transportation Commission, the Potomac Yard Metrorail Implementation Work Group, the ARHA Redevelopment Work Group, and the newly-formed ad hoc Open Space Steering Committee. This representation may set in an ordinance, may be Council-appointed, or City Manager-appointed. A Planning Commissioner chairs the Eisenhower West/Landmark Van Dorn Implementation Advisory Group. Planning Commissioners also participate in the Patrick Henry and MacArthur elementary school advisory groups.