Through the years the planning commission has been the subject of much discussion within professional planning circles. Numerous articles and speeches have focused on the desirable organization, composition, functions and duties of the planning commission. In recent years there have been several sober appraisals questioning the continued value of the planning commission. Conversely, other evaluations have risen sharply to its defense.

In February, 1965, ASPO Planning Advisory Service published The Planning Commission - Its Composition and Function (Report No. 195), a tabulation and summarization of objective information on planning commissions in the U.S. -- size, occupation of commissioners, method of selecting commissioners, number of commission meetings, and the per cent of commission time spent on various activities. The questionnaire on which the February, 1965 report was based also sought subjective comments from planning staff members on the planning commission -- what guidelines should be used in selecting planning commissioners? How can its effectiveness be increased? What is the optimum size of a planning commission? Should the commission be abolished or replaced? The responses to this part of the questionnaire are summarized in this report.

This report supplements the written literature on the planning commission by presenting a current sampling of the opinion of members of the planning profession. Accordingly, it represents a view from the inside, the opinions of those who work most closely with the planning commission.

Responses were received from 155 planning directors. Two-thirds of the respondents worked for city planning agencies; 85 per cent of these worked for cities of less than 250,000 people. The other third worked for county, combined or metropolitan planning agencies.

Several cautions should be kept in mind in reading this report. The views summarized are those of perhaps a sixth of the planning directors in the U.S., and are therefore not representative of all. The responses largely reflect the total personal experience of responding planning directors of the planning commissions under which they have served. They represent only one, albeit important, segment of opinion and are not necessarily illustrative of the atti-
tudes of the entire staff, or of the community. Finally, the opinions are
taken from written responses and may differ from views which might be expressed
in conversations or after considerable probing. Therefore, this report is in­tended primarily as a suggestive and thought-provoking commentary by a sampling
of planning directors on the present-day planning commission. A number of in­
teresting findings are pointed up, among them:

- personal characteristics are viewed as a more important criterion
  for selecting commission members than some form of balance or repre­
sentativeness.

- civic-mindedness and an interest in planning are considered the
  most important personal qualities for a planning commissioner.

- occupational, as opposed to ethnic, civic or geographic balance,
  is the most frequently sought balance for a planning commission.

- planning commissioners with certain occupational backgrounds are
  preferred over others.

- insuring against conflicts of interest by persons serving on the
  commission is a major concern.

- few feel that the planning commission has outlived its usefulness.

There was considerable agreement among respondents on a number of issues,
virtual unanimity on a few. In some instances, sizeable and strongly worded
minority views were expressed. With a few exceptions, there was no pattern
of responses according to the type of agency or the size or location of com­
munity served. While quotations reflecting the most common strands of opinion
comprise the major portion of this report, provocative and atypical views are
included as well.

CRITERIA FOR SELECTING COMMISSION MEMBERS

What informal set of guidelines should be used in selecting prospective plan­
ing commission members, if any? Are personal characteristics such as business
or professional competence, or a known interest in planning matters important?
Should an occupational, ethnic, civic, geographic or other balance be sought?*

The answers to these questions, while differing considerably in detail, indi­cate agreement on the need for some kind of guidelines for selecting commission
members. In no instance was a highly specific and rigid formula for selection
espoused. A few respondents explicitly stated -- and many others implied --
that selection standards are dependent upon local factors. For example, one
planning director felt that the complexity of the community, its planning prob-

*The questions which introduce each section of the report are taken verbatim
from the questionnaire which responding planning directors answered.
lems, and the availability of a competent staff were important considerations. He noted that for a complex city with a competent staff, "the board should preferably not be composed of experts who will try to second guess the planning on the basis of their own limited professional knowledge." Another director commented:

... (The) most effective membership qualities for the planning commission in a town where there is a rough and tumble city government with a long history of special interest oriented councilmen and weak, non-professional planning staffs are probably quite different from ... (those in the same community) if it had a history of top quality governing bodies and very sophisticated staffs.

Forty per cent of the responding planning directors felt that personal characteristics were of prime importance in selecting commission members; 36 per cent mentioned some form of balance as the important guideline; and 19 per cent considered both personal characteristics and balance to be of prime importance in selecting commission members.

**Personal Characteristics**

The following, typical, comments indicate the diversity of personal characteristics which planning directors look for in commission members.

... commission members should not be susceptible to the notion that all development comes under the heading of progress, nor inclined to take the view that any and all development is good, simply for development's sake. ... I would not think it necessary to lean toward those known to be strong advocates of planning. While I would not advocate the selection of a pure unreconstructed "anti," (although I have seen a few of these converted), certainly a questioning attitude is healthy -- more so than blind or rubber-stamp acceptance of any-and-all proposals.

... I am inclined to believe that personal competence in a field that provides sufficient background for basic understanding of planning and zoning matters, land values, land use, and community patterns, are sufficient for basic technical qualifications. Beyond that basis, I prefer to look upon the potential ability of the individual as being a man capable of careful and deliberate judgment when decisions are called for, and he should be a person who has a great deal of "heart" to temper his consideration of matters in which so many people with diverse interests are involved. No, one, technical specialty, such as legal training or experience in handling real estate or engineering should outweigh this "judgment capabilities" factor. ...

... In my opinion, the criteria for selection of planning board members should be (not in order of importance): time to serve and willingness to spend that time on planning matters; minimum of conflict of interest; interest in the future of the community (though not necessarily in planning, per se, prior to appointment); ability
to think objectively, logically, and reasonably—rapidly in the
field of abstract ideas as well as in concrete terms, combined
with the ability to express those thoughts verbally.

While over forty different characteristics were cited by respondents as desir­
able attributes of a planning commission member, making a composite description
of the ideal member difficult, emphasis centered on six characteristics. These
are listed and discussed below. The first two -- civic-mindedness and interest
in planning -- were cited with a significantly greater frequency than the rest.

1. Civic-minded. This characteristic was generally conceived as involving an
unselfish commitment to the general welfare of the community as a whole and
some understanding of its problems. The emphasis on civic-mindedness reflected
a view of the planning commission as a public trust, functioning as much as
possible in an atmosphere free of partisanship and narrow self-interest.

2. Interest in planning. Many respondents felt that individuals with an in­
terest in planning would more likely expend greater time and energy on commis­sion work and would more readily comprehend the technical aspects of planning.
As one planning director put it, "Deadwood kills the tree." Another stated
that:

Considering the amount of time which service on the Planning Com­
mission usually requires, the frequent pressures which are genera­
ted, and sometimes even abuse, the effective commission member
needs an abiding interest, as well as perseverance, to keep at it.

Some respondents considered an interest in planning in itself to be an imma­
terial criterion for membership, arguing that keen intelligence and good judg­
ment are more relevant, and that usually an increase in interest readily fol­
lows appointment.

In this regard, a planning director wrote:

... Planning involves a tremendous diversification of thought,
and since it touches everyone's life to some degree, any reason­
ably intelligent individual should be eligible for appointment.
It is true that one person will comprehend the technicalities of
planning easier than another, however, the basic principles should
be easily understood by all.

Another reservation, occasionally voiced, concerned "eager beavers" who, as
one respondent expressed it, "feel that their enthusiasm and interest are an
acceptable substitute for the staff's planning know-how."

While there was little attempt to detail precisely what an interest in planning
entails, a few respondents were more specific, favoring individuals who "be­
lieve in the efficacy of planning," "are sensitive to the broad scope of com­
munity planning," or "understand the role of planning as a government function."

3. Business or professional competence. A number of planning directors felt
that persons with these qualities would exhibit more than average intellectual
capacities — analytic skill, a sense of logic, verbal poise — and possess
technical skills or knowledge of considerable value to the planning process. One planning director strongly emphasized the importance of business and professional competence by noting:

... I find that professional people and business people are able to bring to the Commission a widespread knowledge of the community collectively, and a specialized knowledge of the various components of the community singularly... I am continuously impressed by the vast amount of information accrued from the members of the Commission and used by the Commission in making their determinations. This information and knowledge is available to them only because of the background of the members. It is information that I did not necessarily have available to me, nor information that would necessarily be made available to them from outside sources.

Nonetheless, a small number of respondents considered these characteristics overly restrictive selection standards by any interpretation. A comment representative of this view was:

... I believe the one personal characteristic that is of utmost importance for a planning commissioner is imagination, since he will be dealing with rather abstract planning concepts. This characteristic is not restricted to any business or profession; therefore, I do not think that business or professional competence is a necessary prerequisite for planning commission membership.

4. High-standing in the community. While most planning directors referred to this characteristic only in the most general terms, some, with more pointed emphasis, mentioned it as entailing "influence," "good reputation," "leadership ability," or "respect in the community." It was felt that persons of high community standing on the commission would legitimate planning in the eyes of the public, giving it greater esteem and acceptability, and provide access to other members of the community power structure whose support or views would be essential in promoting planning schemes. Several planning directors felt, however, that persons of high community standing were frequently unable to devote adequate time and energy to commission activities. As one director commented:

... We have found that most of our commissioners find it difficult to attend regularly scheduled meetings due to the pressing needs of their own particular business. This seems to be a paradox since we need the leadership to implement our programs, and it is usually the best leaders who cannot spare the time to become involved with planning commission matters.

This problem prompted another planning director to suggest that, "appointees should not necessarily be limited to the outstanding leaders in the community, but should include those individuals who are on their way up."

5. Freedom from conflict of interest. Avoiding conflict of interest aroused greater intensity of concern among respondents than any other issue involving the selection of planning commissioners. Nonetheless, considerable disagreement existed over which persons would most likely be subject to conflicts of
interest if they were to be appointed commission members. At the heart of the issue lies a paradox: persons from occupations related to planning are frequently selected in order to complement the skills of the planning staff, yet it is some of these persons who, precisely because of their occupations, are felt to be most susceptible to a conflict of interest.

Several planning directors disqualified certain groups of individuals from consideration. For example, one wrote:

... I sometimes believe that non-property holding and non-specialized members would be best as commissioners because my listed groups all have ties that are contacted by their business associates for special consideration ... I have less confidence in professional people because they can be attacked through loss of income, and I would like to see them eliminated from consideration for good municipal growth.

Another had this reservation about professional men:

... If ... a professional person could be found who is employed exclusively by a particular firm, then their professional opinions and advice ... would be unbiased and unprejudiced. However, we have found that in many instances where a person is in a professional occupation, for hire by anyone, his tendencies are to vote in his own professional vein first; with the overall purpose of planning being secondary ... We have found through the years that business and industrial management people have made the best planning commission members, since they aren't subjected to personal motives as often as professionals.

A third comment in a somewhat similar vein was:

... In regard to ... livelihood status, i.e., self-employed, salaried, retired, it is my contention that planning matters involve questions of individual rights and responsibilities and community welfare and responsibilities, and that self-employed persons very often have great difficulty overcoming the strong bias for individual rights at the community's expense even where they have a reputation for being "public-minded citizens" ...

The brunt of criticism was directed towards particular occupations. For example, twice as many respondents specifically opposed commission members from the real estate field as those who specifically favored them. To a far lesser degree contractors, land developers, and home builders were also viewed, by some, with apprehension. It should be emphasized, however, that the large majority of respondents did not categorically object to commissioners from any particular occupation on the basis of conflict of interest. The general view was, condemn the man, if justified, but not his occupation as a whole. As one respondent commented:

... Sometimes the real estate people ... find it difficult to divorce themselves from their occupational thinking and contacts. This should not be an indictment of the occupation but of some of
the individuals within it. Some Commission members from the real estate field have been able to completely relate their views and opinions to the public benefits involved rather than those of the individual.

6. **Available time for commission work.** Many respondents complained that some of their commissioners did not give adequate time to commission meetings, or to planning "homework." The problem of community leaders, whose civic commitments are generally considerable, has already been mentioned. Some directors noted that other individuals would be forced to sacrifice their commission responsibilities in meeting their job obligations. One stated:

> ... I feel that a board member should be in such a position that time can be spent during the week to consult with the planning director on items on any given board agenda, as well as make each board meeting. ... A laborer, housewife, or clerk would never find time during the day -- or if they could, their employer would more than likely refuse them time off -- to give to planning matters, field trips, site inspections, and board meetings.

A more typical observation was:

> ... Many members are involved in the planning process once a month, for an hour or two at the most, and think very little about the program in the interim. Often this is because the member just honestly does not have the time to contribute -- he has a going business, a thriving law practice -- all of which leave him little time for planning despite his interest.

The consequences of a commission whose members participate sporadically were expressed in the following statement:

> ... If the person does not have the time to read, understand, and discuss thoroughly the results of months and years of research put into a planning study, chances are that little will come of the work. He will "rubber stamp" the recommendations and stay clear of ever getting behind the program as a "moving force." If a commission is comprised predominantly of people without available time, the planner may well be out on a lonesome limb, watching the community develop contrary to any direction or plan. Even worse, the planner may fruitlessly try to sell the plans and recommendations solely on the personal ability he may or may not possess.

Among other personal characteristics, occasionally mentioned by respondents, were: honesty, intelligence, verbal skill, a sense of logic, common sense, a sense of responsibility, tact, and a strong belief in local government. One planning director made a case for political leadership as a valuable qualification for a planning commission member:

> ... Many things can be accomplished at the plan and effectuation stage through the political leadership being informed -- and I do not mean just the elected official. These people can, and often do, join hands in sound planning programs and proposals, and very
effectively. It might help the planner to better understand the complexity of the community he is planning for by having some of these people on the commission.

Balance

Whether the planning commission should be balanced according to occupation, geography, or on some other basis, is an issue of marked complexity. Planning directors disagreed considerably over the merits of a balanced commission. Some respondents, while not specifically advocating balance, did warn against over-representing various interest or occupational groups on the commission. Others, in the same vein, felt the commission should stress a diverse membership more than balance.

The size of population served by the agency often determined the respondent's answer. One respondent from a large metropolitan agency noted that, "it is virtually impossible in big cities to have members representing all interests, groups, and organizations." In contrast, several planning directors from less populated areas advocated a broadly balanced commission, representative of the community's population as a whole. Asserting that the commission's composition should reflect the broad range of community interest groups, these respondents, nevertheless, recommended a membership that was for the most part restricted to the community power structure and to selected occupations -- particularly to the related planning professions.

Occupational balance was favored by the greatest number of planning directors, more for the purpose of enriching the commission with a diversity of viewpoints and skills, than in creating "representativeness" per se. In this regard the following comments are illustrative:

... Occupational groups offer the most convenient guideline available for selecting commissioners. ... They are, however, only as important as they tend to provide the commission with persons of different attitudes toward the role of city government (planning in particular), varied educational levels, and different social backgrounds.

... A diversity in occupational background also seems worthwhile because it furnishes refreshing viewpoints on matters that might otherwise appear routine to the professional staff, and it helps to forestall a stereotyped approach to planning problems.

... An occupational balance would seem to produce greater objectivity in decision-making on the part of a planning commission ...

Persons singled out for representation on the planning commissions came, on the whole, from a narrow range of occupations, as the following comments indicate:

... I believe an ideal planning commission should be composed of an architect, an engineer, an attorney, an educator, a realtor
or land developer, a businessman, and a retired government employee.

... If any specific guidelines are to be used in the selection of members of the Planning Commission, then an occupational balance would be the proper one, that is professions related to planning, such as architects, engineers, and economists.

... The following occupations should be represented on a county planning commission: a lawyer; a realtor, a civil engineer or surveyor, an architect, a landscape architect, a land developer, a township trustee, a county school board member, a county board of health member.

The view of some respondents that certain professionals, particularly real estate men, were susceptible to conflict of interest has already been mentioned. A few respondents voiced additional objections to appointing commissioners from other occupations. Sample statements are:

... We find that engineers and architects make poor members, in general. They tend to be too particular, while planning policy decisions more often require, to a large degree, a broader and less specific solution than the third decimal place. . . .

... Our experience has been that members of the law profession often tie the commission's hands unnecessarily by entering into debates with the city attorney on the permissibility of certain regulations and actions based on corporation law experience or other experience which does not adequately reflect the progression of municipal law. We also find that certain professional members, such as those of the medical and dental profession, miss many meetings held during afternoon hours . . .

More than half of the respondents from county or combined planning agencies -- as compared to approximately 15 per cent of those from city agencies -- felt that geographic balance was desirable. A typical comment was:

... While area representation in a town or small city might not be important, in a county it is; if only from the point of view of a feeling of confidence by the staff and the public that no major geographical section is unrepresented on the Board . . .

Planning directors generally felt that achieving geographic balance would in no way preclude selecting commissioners on the basis of personal characteristics. However, some respondents voiced the following reservation to geographic balance:

... The one danger we run is getting a man from a particular geographic area who takes a parochial, local view rather than the broader, county-wide one we seek . . .

... The primary difficulty in selecting potential members on the basis of rigid groups, especially geographic, is that the individuals selected often believe that they represent only the area from which they were selected. . . .
Only a minority of respondents expressed any opinion on the merits of ethnic balance. Of these, most believed that sizeable minority groups should be taken into account in the selection of commissioners.

**OPTIMUM SIZE OF THE COMMISSION**

Is there an optimum size for a planning commission? Most respondents agreed that there was. While suggestions ranged from as low as five to as high as 16, the vast majority said between five and 11, with more than half selecting a figure between seven and nine. Professional sentiment on this point appears to conform closely to existing practice — more than half of the city planning commissions have seven or nine members. Interestingly, there was no similarity of response on this question among agencies of the same type, or among agencies serving approximately the same size population. Most respondents felt that the commission was too small when policy-making was restricted to a single person or special interest; conversely, they felt it was too large when deliberations became unwieldy or difficulties arose in obtaining a quorum.

**MAKING THE COMMISSION MORE EFFECTIVE**

What changes in the role or composition of the planning commission are needed to increase its effectiveness? While virtually all planning directors affirmed the efficacy of their respective planning commissions, most had suggestions for increasing their effectiveness. Proposals, although varying in detail, centered around three areas of concern. First, a number of respondents felt that the planning commission should spend more time on long-range planning matters and less time on technical or day-to-day problems. One planning director urged, in typical fashion:

... The commission should be relieved of the numerous small items which can be handled administratively by the technical staff. More time and emphasis should be given to long-range planning.

Another suggested that the commission could devote greater attention to long-range planning by delegating "greater responsibility to the staff of the planning department on matters regarding conditional use, lot divisions, and similar matters presently requiring substantial commission time." A third respondent commented, "The commission system has merit, but the effectiveness of most commissions is hindered by too much emphasis on zoning, and too little attention to important policy matters, as they relate to long-range planning."

Secondly, there was considerable discussion of ways to insure against conflict of interest by persons serving on the commission. The following comments indicate the variety of proposals to solve this problem:

... In previous planning positions, I encountered real estate people, engineers, and lawyers with financial interests in zoning
cases and subdivisions who pushed through bad decisions over the objections of the planning director because they made a financial gain. In one city where I was employed, such deviation of ethics got so bad that such unethical persons tried to get the Planning Director fired because he refused to go along with their questionable practices. Therefore, I would recommend that all council members, planning commission members, and board of adjustment members be required to file with the city or county clerk a complete list of real estate interests held by himself or his family. This should be done annually. Further, it should be written into the zoning ordinance that a member of any of the above mentioned boards or commissions shall disqualify himself from voting on any matter which will result in a substantial financial change to himself or a member of his family or any of his associates.

... Our commission would be more effective if nearly all members were elected officials. We tend to have too many individuals who sometimes appear to have difficulty in separating themselves from their private interests.

... It is suggested that instead of eliminating the most interested people from service on the commission, a code of ethics can be developed which requires the individual to abstain from deliberations or voting in any matter involving personal benefit.

Thirdly, some respondents stressed the need for improving the planning know-how of commission members. As one planning director stated:

... Probably the most limiting factor working against greater effectiveness has been the lack of extensive planning knowledge on the part of the more recent appointments. It would be my suggestion that short training courses for both the new and existing members should be held periodically to acquaint them with new concepts in the field of planning. This could be supplemented by periodic trips to other communities for symposiums between commission members as to the planning functions in other communities.

REPLACING OR ABOLISHING THE COMMISSION

Should the commission be replaced with ad hoc citizen advisory committees for different portions of the planning process? Should the commission be abolished?

A majority of respondents opposed replacing the commission with ad hoc citizen committees, since they felt this would make it more difficult to accomplish long-range comprehensive planning and its implementation. Nonetheless, there was some sentiment that such groups could, on occasion, usefully supplement the work of the commission. Among the reasons for this qualified endorsement of ad hoc committees were:
Ad hoc committees may be useful to the commission in studies involving major policy changes in the planning field, but their effectiveness beyond that is open to serious question. . . .

The use of ad hoc committees created for a special project is effective for the promotion of tangible programs such as a new library, civic center, city hall, etc. . . .

Very few respondents contemplated abolishing the planning commission. Almost all believed that, whatever its defects, the commission served a number of important functions. The following two comments typify those which make a case for keeping the commission:

. . . It would appear that the planning board can serve a very useful function in the following ways; it can provide a forum in which planning matters are considered on their merits; it can provide a stable continuity of policy. (This is a fundamental characteristic of planning which cannot be provided where a council is dominated by individual competition and political expediency.) It can ensure that planning studies and proposals are developed on their own merits and are given a complete public hearing before being transmitted to city councils. It can provide a place where citizens interested in the well-being and future development of the community have a chance to contribute their views without becoming directly embroiled in the political process. . . .

. . . In our community the planning board serves the following purposes. It serves as an advisory body to the mayor and council on many highly controversial matters. It serves as a channel for the community to bring to the attention of the city administration major problems in the area of city development. It serves as a device to keep the plans practical--in short, if a group of intelligent, interested, impartial laymen cannot buy a plan, the likelihood of the community doing so is pretty remote. It serves as a body of interpreters to the community. Board members often have access to groups and individuals within the community who cannot be reached effectively by the staff. . . .

Several planning directors, writing in a more speculative vein, felt that the commission would eventually outlive its usefulness when planning became accepted as a legitimate, uncontroversial activity and integrated into government operations.

. . . Perhaps all planning commissions should be abolished; planning is logically a normal function of a governing body. However, planning has not, to my view, become sufficiently accepted and integrated into local government to assure continuation of the function without the presence of planning commissioners . . .

. . . I believe there comes a time in the evolution of the planning process in all cities when the technical function should become a direct staff function, advisory to the chief executive or administrator.
...The time, I believe, for direct alignment of the planner with a normal staff arrangement to the chief executive, is when planning as a regular function is accepted by the community, when the community and its planners both reach a degree of sophistication that says planning is no longer a long-haired dreamer's panacea of idealism, but is recognized as a reasonable, practical, and hard-headed finding of solutions to urban problems on a basis of fact-finding, but more importantly a fact-using basis...

For a few respondents, the time to abolish the commission has already arrived. As one planning director commented:

...I personally subscribe to the view that the planning commissions...have outlived their effectiveness. In many communities planning is now an accepted and integral function of city government and, as such, it should be handled in the same manner as the municipal engineers department or other municipal departments...

CONCLUSION

The samplings presented in this report reflect the major threads of opinion which run through the 155 responses received. As can be seen, there is a diversity of views held by planning directors with regard to the desirable personal qualities of a planning commissioner, although there is some centering of opinion around several characteristics. More unanimity is evident in the opinions about commission balance, optimum size and ways to increase the commission's effectiveness. On the question of retention or abolition of the planning commission, it is fairly safe to conclude that one of the commission's best advocates is still the planning director.
Criteria for Selecting Commission Members

Personal Characteristics
1. Civic Minded
2. Interest in Planning
3. Business or Professional Competence
4. High Standing in the Community
5. Freedom from Conflict of Interest
6. Available Time for Commission Work
Balance

Optimum Size of the Commission

Making the Commission More Effective

Replacing or Abolishing the Commission

Conclusion