

Understanding Virginia's Planning Commissions

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Introduction

The next time you drive to the mall, ask yourself the question, "Why is the mall here and not someplace else?" When you're on your way home, ask yourself another question, "How was it decided that my community should look the way it does?" Those questions can be answered, in part, by understanding more about your local planning commission.

A planning commission is an appointed body of local government charged with developing community land-use plans and providing recommendations on their implementation to the local governing body (e.g., county board of supervisors, town council). Recommendations that are voted for adoption by the governing board can have long-lasting implications on how land is used, economic development opportunities, and the general quality of life in a community.

Planning commissioners are charged with a great deal of responsibility. The knowledge held by planning commissioners can have a direct impact on the preparedness of a community to make informed land-use planning decisions.

In Virginia, planning commissioners have a wide variety of experience in land-use planning. This is because, in Virginia, no prior experience or training in planning is required to be a planning commissioner. To help local governments better assess how prepared their planning commissions are to make informed land-use decisions, a survey of planning commission chairs was conducted by Virginia Cooperative Extension in 2010. This publication summarizes the results of the survey and highlights opportunities to improve the preparedness of local planning commissioners.

About the Survey

A survey was sent to the planning commission chair (or other designee) of the local government in every county, city, and town in Virginia. Of the 325 surveys sent, 98 were returned, yielding a final response rate of 30 percent. Therefore, the survey results are accurate to within 7 percent (at a 90 percent confidence level). The responses received represent a wide diversity of jurisdictions and geographies: rural and urban; cities, counties, towns; and all parts of the state (figure 1).

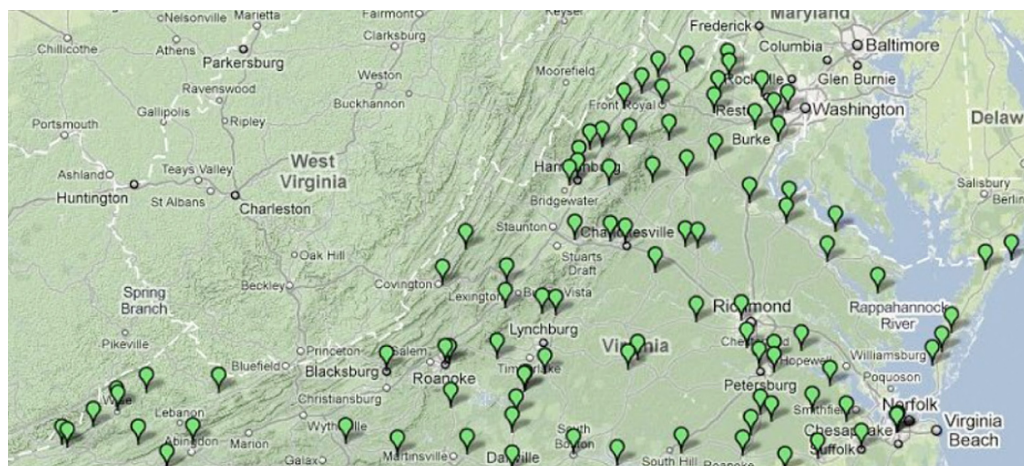


Figure 1.
Map of
respondents.

www.ext.vt.edu

The questionnaire was provided to participants in two forms: a paper copy by mail and electronically via www.survey.vt.edu (a service provided by Virginia Tech). Respondents were asked to provide information about four topics (plus feedback about the survey itself).

1. **Background information** – Basic organizational information about the local planning commission.
2. **Planning knowledge** – Self-assessment by respondents of skills and knowledge involved in the duties of planning commissioners.
3. **Training needs and preferences** – Interest-level assessment of various planning-related topics, commission performance self-assessment, preferred timing and format for trainings, identification and satisfaction of current training opportunities.
4. **Demographics** – Age, gender, educational attainment, and residency tenure.

Characterizing Virginia’s Planning Commissions

Planning commissions in Virginia are charged with the duty of authoring a locality’s comprehensive or master plan. This plan undergoes a review every five years; amendments, if any, are recommended to the local governing body for adoption. Planning commissions are also responsible, in part, for activities involved in the daily business of implementing an adopted plan, such as the evaluation of development proposals.

Through the course of their duties, commissioners often receive support from professional staff, attorneys, and members of the public. Commission members may or may not be compensated for their work.

The survey was used to gain a better understanding of the composition, structure, relationships, and compensation of today’s planning commissions. Each issue is described here.

The Code of Virginia stipulates that, “A local planning commission shall consist of not less than five nor more than fifteen members, appointed by the governing body, all of whom shall be residents of the locality, qualified by knowledge and experience to make decisions on questions of community growth and development; provided, that at least one-half of the members so

appointed shall be owners of real property.” The majority of planning commissions have either seven members (37 percent) or five members (29 percent). Only 9 percent of planning commissions have 10 or more members (figure 2).

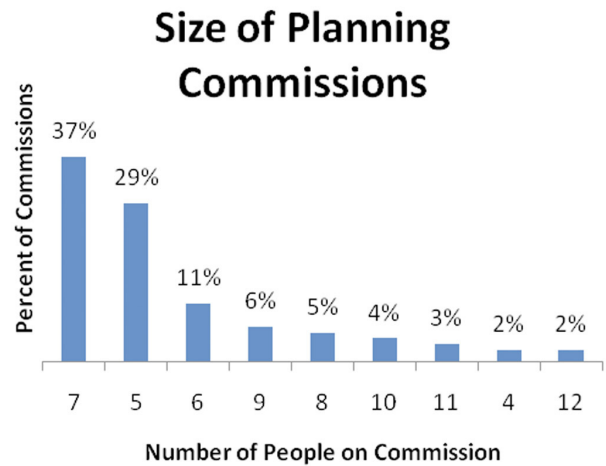


Figure 2. Planning commission size.

The Code of Virginia goes on to say that local planning commissions “shall elect from the appointed members a chairman and a vice chairman, whose terms shall be for one year.” A member may serve multiple terms as chair. The survey sought to characterize planning commission chairs because they are responsible for conducting business on behalf of the body, such as leading public meetings. These responsibilities can influence the public’s perceptions of the planning commission and its performance.

The survey found that commission chairs are long-serving members of planning commissions (figure 3). Forty percent of chairs have served on their planning commissions for more than 10 years. Less than 10 percent of chairs have served on their planning commissions for less than three years. Commission chairs tend to be older men (67 percent are older than 56 years of age; 82 percent are male) with a college education (40 percent have a bachelor’s degree; 34 percent have a graduate or professional degree). There is no minimum level of education to become a planning commissioner in Virginia, and a background in planning is not mandatory.

Tenure of Planning Commission Chairs

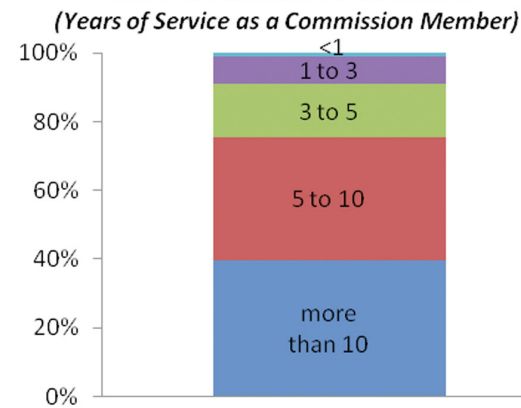


Figure 3. Tenure of chairs.

The performance of a planning commission is also a function of its relationship to the professionals who support its work. Professional planners are employed, in part, by localities to aid planning commissions in their analyses and plan development. Attorneys work with planning commissions to answer legal questions that may arise in the course of the commission’s activities, such as policy interpretation.

Sixty-four percent of communities that reported have at least one professional planner on staff. Of those localities that employ planners, 78 percent employ one to three people, with one planner being most common (36 percent). A few communities have dozens of planners on staff. Most planning commissions stay in close contact with their planners, though not on a daily basis (figure 4).

Planning Communication with Staff Planners

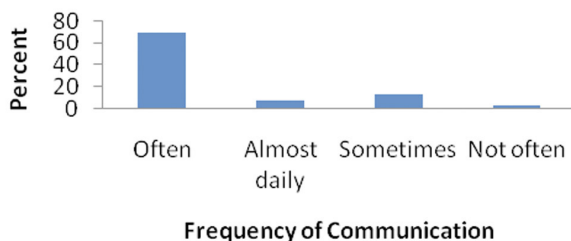


Figure 4. Communication with staff.

Ninety-five percent of localities have access to an attorney — either on staff or on retainer. Of those with access to an attorney, planning commissioners tend to consult with them on an as-needed basis (57 percent), asking questions as they arise. Less often, but still common, the attorney is asked to regularly attend planning commission meetings (32 percent). In these cases, legal advice is provided as needed but may also be sought in situations where clarifications of a statute are needed immediately during a public hearing or other commission meeting.

In addition to the laws that govern land-use planning, a planning commission is governed by its bylaws. A planning commission’s bylaws govern the conduct of its membership, spelling out what, how, and by whom business of the commission is to be conducted. As technology, state mandates, and the public’s expectations of governmental procedures change over time, so too must the bylaws of planning commissions. A measure of how well a planning commission responds to such changes was examined in this survey by asking respondents how recently their planning commission updated its bylaws (figure 5).

Recency of Bylaw Update

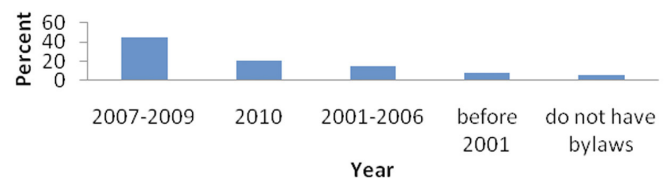


Figure 5. Recency of bylaw update.

Sixty-five percent of respondents reported that their planning commission had reviewed and/or updated their bylaws within the last three years (2007-2010). Twenty percent had done so in the current year (2010). Six percent of respondents reported that their commission did not have bylaws.

One item of interest that may be stated in the bylaws is compensation. Planning commissioners serve by appointment, as selected by the local governing body (e.g., board of supervisors, town council). Compensation is allowed but not mandated by the Code of Virginia. It states, “The local governing body may provide for compensation to commission members for their services, reimbursement for actual expenses incurred,

or both” (Code of Virginia 15.2.2212). Planning commissioners are often reimbursed on a per-meeting basis (25 percent), but more commonly they receive a stipend either monthly or yearly (45 percent). About 30 percent of commissioners do not receive any compensation (figure 6).

Planning Commissioner Compensation

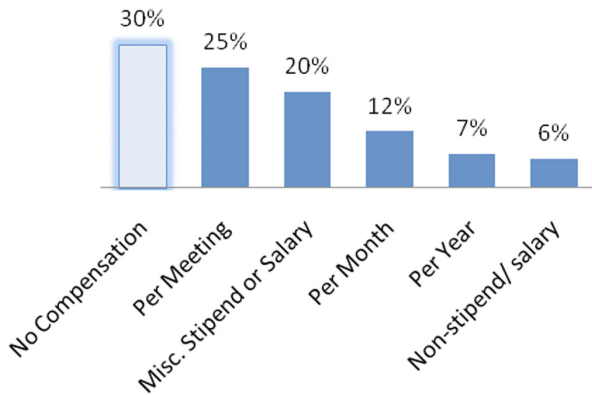


Figure 6. Compensation of planning commissioners.

Of those commissioners who are compensated for each meeting they attend, the most common rate of compensation is \$25 per meeting (30 percent of respondents). A \$50 or \$75 per-meeting fee is also common (18 percent and 9 percent, respectively). Those compensated monthly most commonly reported a \$100 stipend, while those receiving an annual stipend reported an average payment of \$8,074.

Many localities also reported other forms of compensation — often in addition to payments — such as travel and training reimbursements, meals, and gift cards for use at local businesses.

Planning Proficiency

Respondents completed a self-assessment to determine what, if any, skills and knowledge planning commissioners felt they lacked or could be enhanced. Overall, planning commissioners gave themselves high marks in the performance of their duties (figure 7). Sixty-six percent of respondents ranked the performance of their commission as “very high” or “excellent.” However, 33 percent of respondents felt that their commission was only “good.” The remaining 1 percent indicated a “poor” ranking. Performance rankings alone do not

Performance of Duties



Figure 7. Planning commission performance.

indicate preparedness to make informed land-use decisions, however.

To assess respondents’ preparedness, they were asked about their knowledge of 15 topics related to the role and duties of a planning commissioner. Respondents were also asked to choose their top-three priority topics to better understand what topics are considered to be desired training topics. In this way, it was possible to assess high-need and high-interest planning-related education topics. Areas of low interest and low need indicate a self-perceived proficiency among planning commissioners. Topics of low interest and low need may also indicate knowledge areas that planning commissioners do not see as important to fulfilling the duties of the appointment.

Several topics were identified that would be of both high potential interest to planning commissioners while also addressing issues commissioners themselves identified as lower-awareness topics (i.e., low self-perceived proficiency and an interest in training). Topics included “zoning principles and practices,” “planning and zoning law,” and, especially, “visioning/futuring skills.” Additional topics such as “principles and practices of planning,” “capital improvements programming,” “land-use plan content,” and “technical issues” were also seen as areas of lower proficiency.

In addition to examining training topics considered to be core skills and knowledge areas, respondents were asked to identify as many supplementary or special training topics as they wished. Overwhelmingly, the most popular special topic was “development strategies,” which would include information on topics such as mixed-use development, form-based zoning, adaptive reuse, and infill development (figure 8). Also

among the top-five responses were “transportation planning,” “conservation planning,” “green infrastructure planning,” and “affordable housing.”

Somewhat surprisingly, respondents were less interested in “urban development areas” than expected. The Commonwealth of Virginia recently mandated that a significant fraction of Virginia’s communities define urban development areas.

Also of note was the lack of interest in “alternative energy,” and “local food system planning/sustainable agriculture.” These topics are part of an ongoing federal investment in domestic energy and food production. Both are considered to be emerging economic development options.

Other topics suggested by respondents that were not included in the provided list included “disaster planning,” “annexation,” and “tax increment financing/community development authority.”

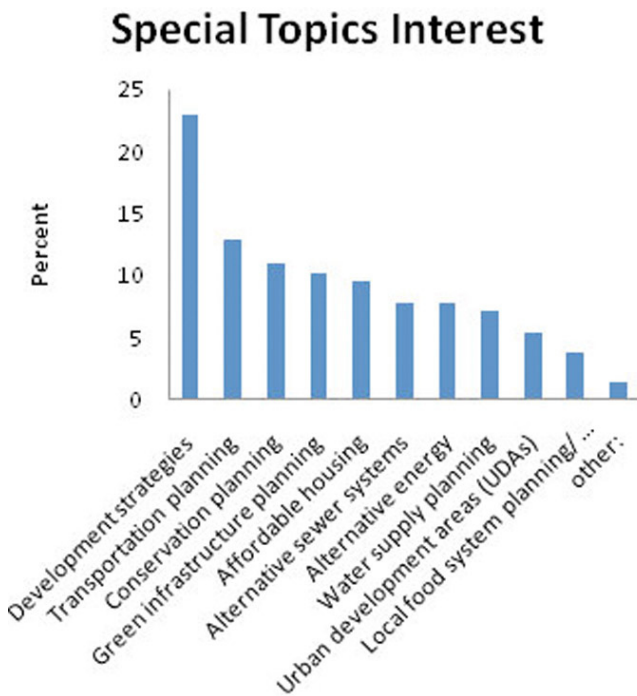


Figure 8. Special training topics.

Improving Preparedness

Planning commission chairs were asked if new members of their commissions receive training upon appointment, and, if so, who provided the training. Nearly 25 percent of respondents indicated that new commissioners receive no training regarding their duties or best practices of planning. Of those that receive training, 27 percent have used an outside organization. The majority (73 percent) of localities provide training to planning commissioners through consultation or other in-house methods used by planning staff, the commission chair, or the local government attorney (figure 9).

Localities that utilize an outside organization were asked to provide the names of the organizations they use for training. Respondents mentioned (in no particular order) Region 2000, New River Planning District Commission, Citizen Planner Education Association of Virginia (CPEAV), Virginia Department of Transportation, U.Va.’s planning courses, Department of Conservation and Recreation, and Virginia Cooperative Extension. Of those respondents that indicated they used an outside organization,

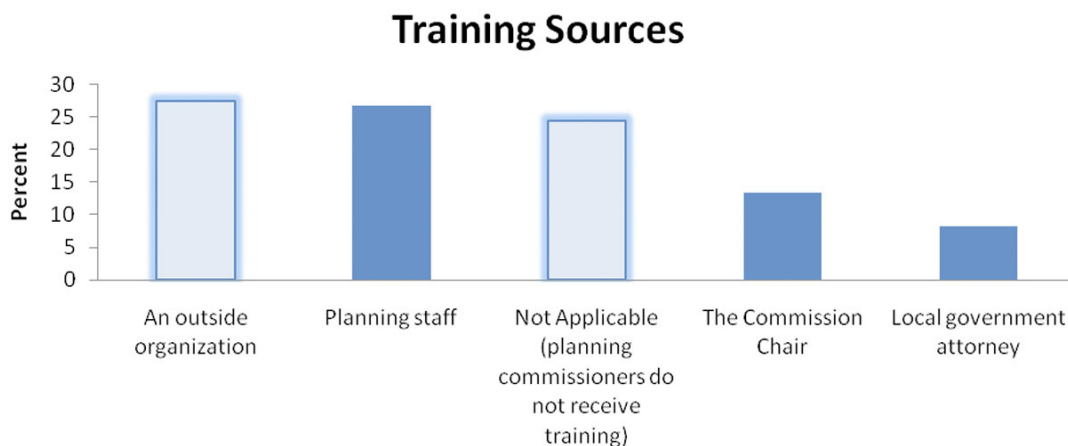


Figure 9. Training sources.

CPC Attendance and Financing

Source

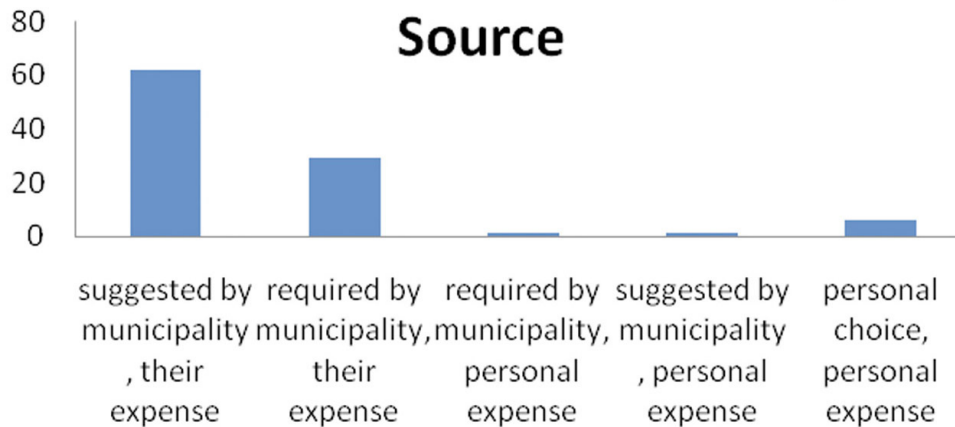


Figure 10: Attendee Financing of CPEAV’s Certified Planning Commissioner’s (CPC) program

100 percent named CPEAV as a source for training. Expecting to see a strong response regarding the CPEAV training program, respondents were asked to identify their source of funding to attend the program. Overwhelmingly, planning commissioners who have attended the CPEAV training were financed by their locality (91.2 percent). Of those, 29.4 percent of attendees did so as a requirement of their appointment to their locality’s planning commission (figure 10). Voluntary training programs provide commissioners access to a social network of fellow commissioners and an understanding of the foundations of community planning law and best practices.

at www.planvirginia.com or Virginia Citizen Planner at www.virginiacitizenplanner.com. Virginia Citizen Planner — a program of Virginia Cooperative Extension — offers Web-based, self-study courses for local officials, nonprofit leaders, and members of the general public with an interest in community planning issues.

Conclusion

In summary, Virginia’s planning commissions have been characterized in terms of their membership makeup and organizational structures. The training needs and preferences of commissioners were also discussed. In considering the information presented, local governments should ask (1) how their planning commission compares with others across the state, and (2) how the preparedness of their commission to make informed land-use decisions could be enhanced given available resources and opportunities.

For further information about available educational opportunities for planning commissioners, visit CPEAV