

Come, Let Us Reason Together

Liz Bass and Greg Applegate

How would your community's residents like to sit down with the mayor and police chief and offer solutions to parking or traffic problems? Residents who live in Sonora, California, can do this.

Parking and traffic matters used to be dealt with at regularly scheduled council meetings, until the council realized that citizens needed more than it could offer in that setting. When people came forward to address councilmembers on these topics, not only would their voices become increasingly shaky but their tempers would flare, too. Presentations tended to be lengthy and off the point. It became clear that the real subject that people wanted to talk about was the depressing state of modern life, with particular reference to its fast pace and widespread incivility, not parking and traffic.

If there are such things as "deep" subjects in government work, then parking and traffic issues must rank at the top of the list. They always turn out to be only the tip of an iceberg, a metaphor of sorts for how people get along with each other in urbanized settings. In the small city of Sonora, we have our share of residents who tell us they can never find a parking place when they need one. On the other hand, we also have pedestrians who have nearly been hit in marked crosswalks.

There are renters with no parking spaces to call their own. There are adolescent speeders in oversized pickups, as well as the slow-and-steady population. In mixed-use neighborhoods, business owners want more street parking for their employees, while homeowners want these employees to park elsewhere. Sonora has environmentalists who don't want big-box stores because of the acres of parking they require, and it has developers who want to build big boxes and see no problem with paving over habitat in the name of progress.

Time for Action

In other words, the city has everything it takes for disastrous conflict to strike. After hearing one particularly unpleasant parking dispute between neighbors "who used to be friends," the council decided to establish a commission that would tackle such issues in a more user-friendly fashion. Councilmembers came to the conclusion that dealing with all of the parking and traffic items at council meetings was a losing proposition, with no one getting much out of it except those viewers of the public access television channel who find temper tantrums entertaining.

The city also thought it would be a good idea to develop a workable format that would allow people to sit down and talk to each other in a civilized manner, away from the camera, and thus to be able to work out better resolutions to their problems-or at least resolutions that everyone could reasonably live with.

In talking it over, councilmembers also decided they wanted to be more proactive, so they directed that the meetings of the new commission allow time for the public to offer ideas on how to do a better job of managing traffic and parking. We knew, for example, that some people were interested in the idea of a park-and-ride shuttle service as a way of easing access to downtown stores. It was decided that the commission could take a closer look at such a system and then make recommendations to the council.

Saving Friendships

Parking and traffic commissions are not new government constructs, but Sonora's council wanted to develop one that had special characteristics. Specifically, we wanted to try and help people get at some of those underlying problems that fueled the anger between neighbors. This is not to say that we were out to save the world, just to make our own small part of it a little friendlier. This sentiment, incidentally, goes straight to the heart of the values we hold dear in our city. It is a good fit for our new commission, and people appreciate it.

In sum, in starting the commission, we wanted a forum for ideas as well as complaints, one that would educate people as well as excite them. By providing participants with technical information, which had to be part of any solution that might come forward, we hoped people would become more knowledgeable about the laws and engineering practices that were the basic building blocks of the parking-and-traffic world. Therefore, we knew we needed representation on the commission for such city departments as police, fire, and public works. We wanted the city engineer to be present at meetings when possible, and of course, we wanted the city administrator there.

The setting in which the commission would operate also would be an important factor in its success. There should be no physical separation between the commission members and the people who came to its meetings. We wanted no dais for speakers to embrace and no elevated seating for commissioners. We wanted to use the roundtable approach and hold meetings in the city hall conference room, where the atmosphere was more suitable for conversations than it was for presentations.

Because it is important that residents feel comfortable in talking with commissioners, we hoped this feeling of comfort would spark a renewed sense of community. After all, anyone who lived or worked in Sonora, including the mayor and city administrator, would have similar traffic and parking experiences in the course of his or her daily activities. It stood to reason that people who participated in commission business would find they had more in common with each other than they suspected.

Ordinance

So, after we had developed a pretty good picture of how we wanted it to operate, we set about the task of creating the Sonora Parking and Traffic Commission. We started by passing Ordinance 743, which established the commission. This ordinance was based on one that had been adopted many years ago, when a planning commission had been set up. Until this time, the planning commission was the only one existing in the city's government structure.

The membership of this P&T Commission, as specified in 743, is as follows: two councilmembers; one police department representative; one fire department representative; one public works representative; and two at-large members from the community. Now that we are up and running, sitting at the table with the seven commission members are members of the print media (no cameras so far), interested citizens, and people who have submitted items for discussion. The meetings begin with a salute to the flag and a roll call, then minutes are taken by the public works department secretary.

The items taken up are very much like the ones that used to come to the city council. On a recent agenda, the commission considered moving a stop sign farther into the sight of lines of oncoming drivers; creating a four-way stop on an arterial close to a new business; and setting aside a new disabled space in a downtown parking lot.

Maybe not the stuff of dreams, but these are the kinds of things that people care about and want to do right, which is to say fairly and equitably. Talking about them seems to make everyone feel like a player. Whatever the reason, the commission is a hit with the public. People who come to its meetings always comment on how interesting they are and how much they have learned. In city government, it doesn't get any better than that!

City staff members are happy, too. They come to the commission table with a wealth of information they are happy to contribute to discussions. Because they have a place at the table with the public and councilmembers, staff members tell us they are able to see more about how the political side of things works.

Since the P&T Commission began, it has not had one shaky voice or boiling temper impeding its forward progress. There is something calming about the roundtable approach, perhaps the eye contact it requires. Sonora has found that people seem more able to listen to each other and more likely to consider ideas that differ from their own. Let us just emphasize that Sonora's commission is for all the people and not

just for the squeaky wheels of this world. Come to think of it, we don't hear much from those folks anymore. I wonder why.

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