



How to Reach Local Land Use Officials

One of the keys to NEMO's success in Connecticut has been our determination to remain focused on one major target audience—local land use decision makers. This doesn't mean that we don't engage other important audiences, like developers, landscape architects, professional planners, etc. What it means is that our educational presentations and materials are developed with local officials in mind, and when we find ourselves before other audiences, we make no adjustments to, or apologies for, that focus.

We believe that local land use officials are among the most important audiences out there. They are also among the most neglected, and that's not a coincidence. There are a number of factors that make local officials a tough audience for you to set your educational sights on. And, although your definition of "local land use decision maker" may be different

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from ours, most of these factors are more or less universal. So, here are a few points on local officials and how to reach them.

The World of Local Land Use Officials

- Most land use commissioners are volunteers, whose life's work is something other than their commission work. While some volunteers
- Most volunteer commissioners receive limited training, yet their work involves complex issues. Commissioners deal with a variety of



are trained in fields related to land use planning and regulation, most are not.

- It is hard for some volunteers to admit they need training, especially if they have served on the board for a while. Ironically, those who refuse to attend workshops because they feel they know it all, are often the ones who most need education.
- Some commissioners are elected or appointed for political reasons, which means they may have hidden agendas that cloud their ability to make rational land use decisions. Some people with hidden agendas may be very open to education, in the hope they can use the knowledge gained to better promote their vested interests.

Nonpoint Education for Municipal Officials (NEMO) is a University of Connecticut educational program for land use decision makers that addresses the relationship of land use to natural resource protection.

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economic, engineering, legal, planning and political issues and many are overwhelmed by what they are supposed to know and do.

- When writing regulations commissioners are powerful legislators, with state enabling legislation and court decisions as the only limiting factors on what they can regulate. Once the regulations are written, their role shifts to that of administrators and their responsibility becomes more focused: if an application complies with adopted regulations the commission must approved it, if it does not comply, it must be denied.
- Commissions have high member turnover. New members are often overwhelmed after attending a few meetings. Some quickly resign, others leave when their term of office expires.

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Approaches to Reaching Local Officials

- Most commissioner training is designed to turn volunteers into instant engineers, attorneys, planners or cartographers. Commissioner training should focus on helping volunteers make rational land use decisions. To that end, it is important they know the correct questions to ask of applicants, rather than getting involved in the detailed technical aspects of each proposal.
- Land use officials have many legal mandates that must be addressed. For example, state enabling statutes tell them what they must do, as well as what they might do. Commissioner education should present information within

the context of their mandated responsibilities, such as adopting land use regulations and insuring applicant compliance with adopted regulations.

- One of the educational challenges is that local officials understand the importance of having land use regulations be based on a comprehensive plan rather than emotion, or vested and political interests. As the land use plan provides the blueprint for land use regulations, the two should be harmonious. Hence, a land use education program should address both planning and regulation.
- Commission turnover means educational programs must be continually presented to reach new members. Many agencies conduct one-time workshops and feel that this is adequate. Not so.
- Commissioners need to understand their legal roles and responsibilities so they do not conflict with the mandates of other officials. Any educator addressing land use officials should know which commission has a legal responsibility to address the issue being presented, as opposed to those who might wish to get involved though not legally charged to do so.

Educational presentations and materials should be kept simple, direct and non-technical.

- Most local land use decisions are made at the site level. As a result, it is difficult for volunteer commissioners to step back and determine the regional and long-term impact of their individual decisions. Commissioners will be interested in programs that address both site level and “big picture” issues.

- Many feel that to gain the attention of a land use commission you must ply them with stacks of complex maps and technical reports. Most people, including many land use officials, can't read maps and won't read reports. Educational presentations and materials should be kept simple, direct and non-technical. Technical background material can always be provided later, upon request (in our experience such requests are few and far between).



- Any organization seeking to work with commissioners must honestly evaluate the presentation skills of staff. The staff members who are very strong on technical issues or material preparation may not be the best speakers. It helps if the educator has served on a local land use board or is familiar with local issues.
- There is no dishonor in answering a question by saying: "I don't know, but I will get back to you on that." Attempting to be an expert with all the answers will only undermine your credibility in the long run.
- Any educational effort must decide what they are and are not willing to provide as follow up. Since Cooperative Extension is an educational organization, all our follow up is in the form of educational programs or projects. We usually refuse requests for technical consulting work, like assisting with site plan review or writing regulations. However, each program is different, and must decide where to draw the line.

Logistic Tips for Presentations to Local Officials

- Many interest groups are trying to get the attention of land use boards. Many agencies try to gain entrance to the commission under the banner of education. Some of these groups have agendas that are hidden under proposed educational efforts, or have no professional outreach capability. Therefore, it's important to clearly define for local officials and community leaders who you are, and what your objectives are. Connections with other programs, particularly if they are regulatory programs (e.g., Stormwater Phase II) must be made very clear.
- Try to be invited to a community rather than thrusting yourself on it. (With a successful pilot project under your belt, this will not be as difficult as it sounds.) Whatever your first contact with a town (Planning Director, Zoning Chairman,

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League of Women Voters President, etc...) work with them to widen the audience for a presentation.

- Land use boards generally do not communicate with one another. Workshops present opportunities for several boards to meet so all hear the same thing, at the same time. Joint workshops have the added benefit of reducing the number of talks the educator needs to present to reach the target audience.

- Don't overlook other town boards and local organizations that may be key players in the land use game. For example, Economic Development Commissions, Chambers of Commerce, and Land Trusts can be key workshop participants.
- We have found getting the chief elected official involved is an effective way to promote a workshop. Having the CEO send a letter urging all town commissions and boards to attend is a very effective way of getting a decent turnout.



- Most commissions have full meeting agendas. Often the commission will suggest you present your educational program as item #7 on a 15 item agenda. This is not the ideal setting to present an educational program to a land use board because if the workshop has substance, one hour is usually needed to properly present and discuss the subject. The most you can accomplish in a situation when you are placed on a busy agenda is to introduce yourself, provide a program overview, and establish another date to make a full presentation.
- It is often best to arrange a workshop on a date other than the commission's regular meeting date. However, the commission will be reluctant to plan another meeting as they are already

obligated to attend several monthly meetings. It may take time to build the multi-board interest that will make such a meeting feasible.

- Any correspondence mailed solely to the Chairman of a board, will most likely end up

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in the circular file and not presented to the full board. When publicizing a workshop try to reach each member.

- Once you get the commission's attention, it is important to deliver a lively informative presentation that relates to their world.
- As with most people, commissioners enjoy humor. Don't be afraid to use in your presentations.
- Use the latest technology to graphically convey your message. Overhead and hard slides are rapidly becoming dated and their use might put you at a disadvantage.
- Using examples from the target or nearby community helps localize issues. Digital technology makes this customization much easier today than it was even 2 years ago.

The National NEMO Network is a group of affiliated projects that educate local land use decision makers about the relationship of land use to natural resource protection. The Network is coordinated by the University of Connecticut Nonpoint Education for Municipal Officials (NEMO) Program, with funding from USDA/CRSEES, EPA/OWOW and NOAA/NOS. The National NEMO Network is a program of the Center for Land use Education And Research (CLEAR). Land, Sea and Space Grant collaborating.

