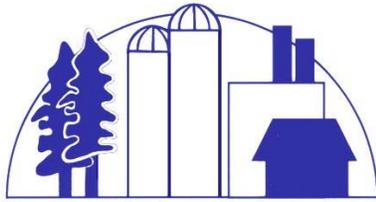


Recruiting and Retaining Qualified Plan Commissioners

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Center for Land Use Education



Project Partners

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Cover photos: Top and bottom photos, Green County planning officials. Photographs taken by Dr. Anna Haines, Center for Land Use Education; center, Town of Verona Planning Taskforce members developing Farmland Priority Zones as part of the Town's comprehensive planning process. Photograph courtesy of UW-Madison – Land Information and Computer Graphics Facility. Photograph taken by Douglas Miskowiak

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INTRODUCTION

If your community is planning or about to plan, there are good reasons to consider appointing a plan commission.

difficult task, the processes detailed in this bulletin will help to attract and keep dedicated commissioners who reflect the diversity of their communities.

Plan commissions:

- ◆ *Are required by Wisconsin state law for adoption of a comprehensive community plan or land division ordinance.*
- ◆ *Can reflect a wide array of community interests and provide additional expertise on specific planning issues.*
- ◆ *Can devote more time and energy to planning and land use issues than the local elected body.*
- ◆ *May insulate the elected body from some contentious issues.*

Despite the important roles plan commissions perform, communities often struggle to recruit and retain dedicated and energetic volunteers. This bulletin aims to help local elected officials, assigned appointment responsibility by state statutes, identify, recruit, and retain qualified and dedicated commissioners. It suggests traits to look for in candidates and offers tools and templates to actively find them. This bulletin also considers and offers suggestions for overcoming common barriers that impede commissioners from maintaining their civil service promise. Although getting candidates may be a



RECRUITING QUALIFIED COMMISSIONERS

Recruiting qualified commissioners is a matter of:

- ◆ Defining the plan commission's roles and responsibilities,
- ◆ Defining commissioner qualifications,
- ◆ Recruiting candidates, and
- ◆ Selecting and retaining capable volunteers.

Although it is the legal responsibility of local executive leaders (i.e., town chairs, village presidents, city mayors, county executives or board chairs) to appoint commissioners, they can make their job easier by working together with their fellow board or council members. The board or council can help to identify the role and authority of the commission and desirable commissioner traits prior to selection of qualified candidates. This way, local executive leaders balance their authority to appoint commissioners with the political views of their colleagues. Accord among local elected officials establishes trust, a cooperative spirit, and a precedent for a productive plan commission. The following tips and tools will assist recruitment efforts.

“...choose individual commissioners that together create a robust, yet locally diverse plan commission.”

Define Commission Roles and Responsibilities

Long before selecting commissioners and even before identifying desirable commissioner traits, the local governmental unit (LGU) must define the purpose of the commission and identify the duties that commissioners are responsible to execute. Typical roles employ the plan commission to craft new or amend existing plans, engage the public, administer policies, and even manage planning staff or oversee consultants. The commission performs these duties for a wide array of topics, including economic development, housing, and natural resources, among others. Identifying the purpose and roles of the commission is helpful, both for the LGU and potential commissioner candidates. For potential candidates, a clear job description helps them understand what duties they are required to perform, if appointed. For local elected officials, defining commissioner roles and responsibilities, helps them outline traits suitable for accomplishing commission responsibilities.

State statutes allow a local governing body to delegate some land use decisions (land division review, conditional use permits under local ordinances, etc.) to the



commission. Delegation of substantive decisions to the commission may encourage members to take the appointment more seriously. The commission's potential diversity of interests, expertise, and available time are other reasons to assign it this role.

Define Commissioner Qualifications

Likely, no single individual alone has all the skills and experiences the commission needs to fulfill its purpose and there is no doubt, that no single individual can reflect the diversity, interests, or needs of an entire community. Officials should choose individual commissioners that together create a robust, yet locally diverse plan commission. Below is a set of criteria to help identify qualified commissioners.

1. Commitment to Community Service

Candidates must demonstrate a concern for serving the public interest.

They must be willing to attend and come prepared for commission meetings as well as educational workshops, conferences, and other planning events. Look for those folks who have a good record of civic involvement and can sustain service throughout their term.

2. Interpersonal and Decision Making Skills

Desirable candidates have strong

interpersonal and decision-making skills. Commissioners that possess the following traits enhance the commission's productivity.

- ◆ Good communicator
- ◆ Detail oriented
- ◆ Willingness to learn
- ◆ Critical and objective thinker
- ◆ Open minded

3. Planning Skills and Expertise

Planning involves numerous and complex topics, such as natural resource management and economic development. Choose commissioners that have skills and experiences that can broaden the commission's collective knowledge. Experiences with land use law, natural resources, policy development, local government, economic development, etc. Strong analytical skills (can read maps and plan proposals and can assess potential land use impacts)

4. Ethics

All who engage in planning must practice ethical conduct.

Choose commissioners that will uphold ethical standards and do not or are not perceived to have conflicts of interest. The American Planning Association (APA) maintains a set of principles to guide ethical planning (see www.planning.org/ethics/ethics.html). According to the APA, professional planners and local officials involved in planning and decision-making must protect the public's interest and strive for

“...professional planners and local officials involved in planning and decision-making must protect the public interest and strive for ‘honest’ and ‘independent’ decision-making.”



“honest” and “independent” decision-making.

In addition, Wisconsin Statute 19.59 establishes a code of ethics for local appointed or elected governmental officials, employees, and candidates. It establishes that local officials may not accept items or services for private benefit that could influence the official’s action or judgment. It also establishes that officials may not take action or make judgments in matters that affect the official, the official’s family, or associated organizations. For more information about the Wisconsin Code of Ethics visit the Wisconsin Ethics Board Website at <http://ethics.state.wi.us/>.

5. Diversity

The plan commission should reflect the diversity and uniqueness of the community it represents. The ideal commission will consist of individuals that can reflect various social, cultural, economic and other community interests. A diverse and reflective commission can be achieved using a combination of the following criteria:

Geographical and Jurisdictional Diversity

Membership should reflect community physical or geographically based issues. A community may consist of various physical landscapes – each with its own unique issues. For example, a community may consist of an area dominated by forests and lakes. Issues here will differ from other areas

dominated by agriculture or urban land uses. Commissioners should be selected to mirror interests in those areas.

In many places communities are planning together in multi-jurisdictional efforts. Issues and interests are sometimes bound by jurisdictional boundaries. For example, one township may be pro-growth while its neighbors are pro-preservation. Ideally, in a multi-jurisdictional effort, each jurisdiction’s interests should be reflected on the commission.

“...the commission should also reflect the community’s age, gender and cultural makeup.”

Demographic Diversity

Because different types of people have different interests and needs, the commission should also reflect the community’s age, gender, and cultural makeup. For example, retired citizens may want better health services while younger parents want better schools for their children. In Wisconsin, over 50 percent of the population is female, 11 percent are minorities, and the median age is just under 36 years (Wisconsin Blue Book, 2002). Ideally, a local commission should reflect the local community’s gender, age, and cultural demographic.

Economic and Professional Diversity

Selecting commissioners based alone on demography or geography does not assure representation of important economic or professional interests in the community. Such representation is essential in forming policy objectives



and in determining the impact of proposed plans and regulations on different segments of the community. Select commissioners from different economic and professional backgrounds. For example, the commission should reflect both white and blue collar interests.

Recruitment Tools

Once the purpose of the commission is defined and appropriate commissioner traits are agreed upon, it's time to begin recruitment. This section provides recruitment tools and tips to generate awareness of the position. When applying these methods, take care not to overwhelm candidates, yet clearly state what is expected of them. The goal is to recruit commissioners that fully understand the requirements of the position and can remain committed throughout their term.

Job Description

The job description is the ideal tool to clearly convey the roles and responsibilities of the plan commission to potential candidates. Communicate effectively by crafting a clear and concise portrait of the job (Table 1). The job description should state the purpose of the commission, as well as the duties and desired qualifications of commissioners defined earlier. Appendix A provides a model job description to reference or borrow.

“Communicate effectively by crafting a clear and concise portrait of the job.”

Advertise

Let people know you're looking for candidates. Local newspapers, buyer-guides, government bulletin boards, and existing newsletters are great places to announce the open position.

Nominations and Personal Recruitment

A common and effective method for recruiting commissioners is for the appointing official to accept applications for the appointment or actively seek candidates themselves. Appointing officials know what qualifications are necessary and likely know some qualified candidates. Officials should

personally ask qualified people to consider volunteering and submit an application. Face to face contact often compels people to act. People are less likely to say no when a colleague or friend gives them their confidence by nominating them. Appointing officials should use nominations and personal recruitment as an

opportunity to promote an understanding of the position to potential appointees. The decision for appointment should still be based on the application and evaluation process, rather than focus on single endorsements.

Application

The application form should ask questions regarding the skills and qualifications of the applicant (see Appendix B). It should be brief and concise. Ask for basic personal and contact information to help identify members that will achieve commission diversity.



Table 1. Job Description Headings

Purpose of the Plan Commission:

Describe what general roles the commission will execute (i.e., craft new or amend existing plans or ordinances, administer policies, manage planning staff, or act as ministerial officers).

Duties of the Commission:

Specifically describe the duties of the commissioner. Commissions are often responsible for gathering and analyzing information, drafting the elements of a plan, involving the public, and recommending the plan to the LGU for adoption. Other important duties include self-education and preparation for meetings. If the commission manages planning staff or acts as the local building inspector, list these expectations.

Special Duties:

The commission may need a special position filled such as chair, vice-chair, or secretary. Though special duties are often assigned or elected after a commission is formed, an applicant can anticipate these potential duties if they are included in the job description.

Time Requirements:

State the amount of time expected for commission activities, such as meetings, and meeting preparation, including self-education.

Desired Traits:

List the technical and interpersonal skills of a qualified commissioner.

Supervision:

Discuss the commission's working relationship with those whom it supervises, such as the consultant or the planning staff. Also discuss the commission's relationship with the LGU.

Working Conditions/Effort:

Describe the physical and mental requirements of the job and the typical working conditions of the commissioner. Most commissions will perform 99 percent of their work indoors, in an intellectual capacity, though outdoor visits are sometimes necessary.

Terms of Office:

Describe the length of commitment. When an elected official is required to serve on the commission, the term of appointment must correspond to the term of the elected office. Otherwise, terms of appointment should be staggered to maintain continuity and institutional memory for the commission.

Benefits / Stipends:

If your community intends to provide commissioners with stipends, reimburse expenses or provide other benefits, state it in the job description. Such policies send a message that a community is willing to invest in the work of the commission and values its services.



Evaluate Applicants and Select Commissioners

The search has narrowed and it is time to make final commissioner selections. To restate, appointing commissioners remains the responsibility of local executive leaders, but involving fellow board or council members to help select qualified and reflective commissioners is a good idea. Appendix C provides a template to rate various applicants. With lesser-known applicants, consider doing personal interviews. Use Appendix B to serve as a potential list of interview questions. During the interview, the appointment committee should attempt to gain mutual understanding of commitments and expectations. Be ready to answer questions about how the LGU will work with and support the commission.

Now it is time to ask for the commitment of qualified candidates. If they commit, ask to publish their commitment in a press release. The press release not only welcomes your new civil servant, but also, through formal public acceptance, motivates them to excel in the position.



RETAINING COMMITMENT

Six Ways to Retain Commissioners and Keep Them Productive

By now, a qualified group of community volunteers are working together as the local plan commission. Once commissioners are recruited, sustaining their commitment to public service requires some thoughtful preparation. Local elected leaders and the commission chair should prepare commissioners to overcome personal or professional barriers that limit their productivity. The following section explores six ways to overcome common barriers that commissioners face to inspire positive and productive function of the commission.

1. Clearly communicate.

Effectively communicate the roles and expectations of the commission. Make sure commissioners know when and where to meet, what to do, and how they can do it. Let them know if actions must be taken before the next meeting. Insist that the commission “debrief” at the end of each meeting to make the next meeting even more productive.

Example Barrier:

“Meetings and discussions are inefficient and unproductive.”

Possible Solutions:

A. The commission chair should make expectations vivid, clear, and easy to remember by writing down tasks to

complete, when they must be completed, and who is responsible for them.

- B. The commission should receive instructions or a model for accomplishing tasks.
- C. Establish clear rules and procedures for commission meetings and decision-making.

2. Provide opportunities for education and preparation.

Education and preparation help commissioners become and remain productive. Commissioners might withdraw if they lack the information and training needed for effective participation.

Example Barrier:

“I don’t know enough and am frustrated being a commissioner.”

Possible Solutions:

- A. Budget for training seminars and workshops to build commissioner capacity.
- B. Provide a meeting agenda, background reports, maps, and studies several days before the scheduled meeting.
- C. Invite a technical expert to educate on a specific planning topic.
- D. Encourage commissioners to attend meetings of a neighboring commission with a good reputation.

3. Have members make commitments.

Most people want their peers to see them as dependable, and therefore, are more likely to



keep commitments they make in public. For example, in Waupaca County, committee members were asked to review articles and present back to the committee. Members were asked to make verbal commitments and they stuck to their promise. Written commitments are often more effective, but can be intimidating. Take care not to scare away participants with this technique.

Example Barrier:

“Some commissioners still do not come prepared to meetings.”

Possible Solutions:

- A. When assigning tasks to commissioners, directly ask for a commitment. “Jane, can you read this article and present findings at the next meeting?”
- B. Record commitments in the meeting minutes. “Jane agreed to read an article and present at the next meeting.”

4. Remind commissioners to participate by using prompts.

Prompts remind people to participate. Prompts are visual or auditory cues, such as a phone call to remind a fellow member of an upcoming meeting. The most effective prompts are clearly noticeable, presented close in time to the desired action, and stated in a positive manner.

Example Barrier:

“I forgot there was a meeting tonight.”

Possible Solutions:

- A. Give each commissioner a calendar to hang beside their refrigerator. Highlight important dates.

- B. Send each commissioner a letter, a few days in advance of the meeting, as a reminder to attend.

5. Use group expectations to influence commissioners.

People are more likely to participate when they see their peers and friends doing the same thing, or when they receive peer or public recognition for participating.

Example Barrier:

“The commission takes a load of criticism for all the hard work we do. I don’t know if it is worth it to volunteer.”

Possible Solutions:

- A. Recognize commissioner’s hard work and dedication in a newspaper article.
- B. As the commission chair, be a role model to other commissioners by exhibiting positive behavior and working hard on issues, even through criticism and tough times.
- C. Host an awards banquet or potluck to relax and reward volunteers for a job well done.

6. Use material incentives.

When volunteers are hard to find or retain, use material incentives to reward their participation. Material incentives are most effective when closely paired to the desired action, such as providing stipends for attending each meeting. Incentives should be used to reward positive performance and should be made noticeable. Material incentives are not widely used by communities; rather, most rely on the “spirit of altruism”.

Example Barrier:

“I live 20 miles from where we meet. It costs me too much time and money to attend. Plus, who will watch my children?”

Possible Solutions:

- A. Reimburse travel expenses or provide a stipend for attending meetings.
- B. Provide gift certificates for members that attend ten meetings in a row.
- C. Sponsor on-site child care using commissioner’s husbands, wives, or grandparents as caretakers.

Establish Procedures in the Commission Bylaws

The “six ways” provide general guidelines to enhance productivity and retain commissioners. However, they are only effective if procedures are in place to apply them. Bylaws establish conduct for commission business. As appropriate, design bylaws that achieve clear communication, accommodate educational opportunities, and employ commitments, prompts, and incentives. Below are specific procedures commonly established in the commission bylaws.

Rules of Conduct

To enhance meeting efficiency and help commissioners maintain their commitment, explicitly state the rules of conduct. Firmly establish the commissioner’s responsibility to uphold ethics, the standards for proper meeting conduct, and the rules for attendance. Discuss expectations for self-education and preparation. Discuss compliance with open meeting and records laws. Clearly outline how the commission

comes to agreement. Insist upon careful listening, respect for others, open-mindedness, and objectivity.

Absentee Commissioners and Alternates

Commissioners have hectic lifestyles and cannot always attend scheduled meetings. Bylaws should require a commissioner that anticipates an absence to notify both the commission chair and the appropriate alternate commissioner. Distribute up-to-date, contact lists so commissioners can make required notifications. Encourage alternates to attend regularly to gain familiarity with issues and procedures.

Dismissal

In some rare instances, a commissioner may consistently break their civil service promise. They skip meetings repeatedly or do not uphold the ethics and responsibilities of the commission. Commissioners may only be dismissed “for cause” (an ethical breach or failure to discharge duties) after being given notice and an opportunity for a hearing. Disparate points of view or personal conflicts with other commissioners are not grounds for dismissing a commissioner. Out of respect for dedicated commissioners, outline procedures, and establish cause for dismissal. For example, missing a total of four meetings or two consecutive meetings may be cause for dismissal. Upon giving notice, the commissioner will be given an opportunity for a hearing, where the local elected governing body will decide cause for dismissal.



CONCLUSION

Civil service is likely low on the average American's priority list. Families, jobs and recreational activities are highly valued. Elected officials have a tough job recruiting dedicated folks and keeping them. Finding qualified and committed volunteers who represent the diversity of the community can help ease the elected official's burden. Once you find them, make their jobs easier by minimizing the barriers that limit their effectiveness. Most importantly, support

your commissioners and give them recognition for a job well done. Let them know how valuable they are to you, and that their commitments will lead to good decisions and actions that benefit the whole community. Making a difference is often the only reward needed for sacrificing fun with family and friends. Help your commissioners make the most of their valuable time.

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APPENDIX A: MODEL DESCRIPTION OF PLAN COMMISSIONER RESPONSIBILITIES

(Adapted from Waupaca County, WI and Lafayette County, CO).

Description of Responsibilities Planning Commissioner

Purpose:

The planning commission (PC) is appointed to advise the local unit of government (LGU) regarding community planning and land use management. The PC is responsible for crafting and recommending the community plan and implementation procedures to the LGU for adoption. The commission also decides the following matters: subdivision/land division plat approval, conditional use permits, driveway permits, etc.

Primary Duties:

The primary duties of the PC include:

- ◆ *Community planning.* The PC is responsible for crafting and recommending the community plan to the LGU for adoption.
- ◆ *Plan implementation.* The PC is responsible for crafting and recommending implementation programs, procedures, and tools, such as zoning or subdivision ordinances to the LGU for adoption.
- ◆ *Public involvement.* The PC is responsible for involving the public in planning and decision-making. The PC will ensure public access to information, education, open meetings,

and opportunities for public input and influence.

- ◆ *Compliance with legal standards.* The PC must keep abreast of and implement laws related to:
 - ◇ Open meetings and public records
 - ◇ Ethical conduct
 - ◇ Meeting conduct
 - ◇ State and federal laws regarding community planning and land use matters
- ◆ *Intergovernmental cooperation and coordination.* The PC cooperates with state, municipal or regional planning agencies, and other groups to ensure harmonious and integrated planning.

Additional Duties:

- ◆ *Continuing education.* The PC attends training sessions to keep abreast of current trends and information to better understand and fulfill its role.
- ◆ *Preparation.* The PC reads and reviews plan related documents, background materials, and listens to staff presentations and public comments.

Special Duties:

Special positions such as chair, vice-chair, and secretary will be elected after the plan commission is formed.

Time Commitments:

The PC meets once a month for approximately two hours, depending upon the number and complexity of tasks on its agenda. Anticipate one hour of preparation time for each hour of meeting time.

Desired Qualifications:

The following skills and traits are important to be a successful commissioner:

- ◆ Attention to detail, open mindedness, patience, and willingness to listen and learn.
- ◆ Ability to work as a team and make fair decisions based on the best interest of the community.
- ◆ An understanding of the planning process, land use issues or law, construction or development practices, and environmental or economic resources.
- ◆ Ability to read maps and plans.
- ◆ Ability to speak and write clearly.

Supervision:

The PC receives direction from, and is responsible to, the municipal governing board or council. The PC is supported by, and oversees the staff of the Planning and Zoning Department and contracted consultants.

Working Conditions:

The PC conducts 99 percent of work indoors in an intellectual capacity, but occasionally visits outdoor sites for information gathering or inspection.

Term of Appointment:

Three-year staggered terms of office commence on (insert date). (Five or Seven)* PC members are appointed by the chief elected official of the LGU. An alternate member/s may also be appointed. Commissioners may only be removed from office “for cause” (an ethical breach or failure to discharge duties) after notice and a hearing.

* A Town with a population less than 2,500 may appoint a 5-member commission.

An appointment will be made by (date). Return completed application to the (insert municipal name) Clerk by (insert date/time).

Extra pages may be attached to the application if needed.

Benefits:

This is a voluntary position with a \$25 stipend per meeting. Funding for related educational purposes is available as well.

Indemnification:

Appointed officials are protected from personal liability claims when performing duties within the scope of their appointment.



APPENDIX B: APPLICATION FOR APPOINTMENT TO THE PLAN COMMISSION

APPLICATION FOR APPOINTMENT TO (insert municipality name) PLANNING COMMISSION

Name: _____ Date: _____
 Home address: _____
 Length of residence: _____ Home phone: _____ Business phone: _____
 FAX number: _____ E-mail address: _____
 Occupation: _____ Current Employer: _____

1) Have you volunteered or been affiliated with other community groups, government, or professional associations before? If so, please list those activities and how you were involved.

Group	Activity
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

2) The position generally requires (##) day/evening meetings each month and (##) hours of meeting and preparation time. Are you currently involved in activities that may conflict with your time commitment to the plan commission? How can these conflicts be resolved?

3) Please identify traits you possess that qualify you for the position. Describe why you believe you possess these traits.

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Good listener | <input type="checkbox"/> Open-minded | <input type="checkbox"/> Critical thinker |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clear speaker | <input type="checkbox"/> Detail oriented | <input type="checkbox"/> Others? Please list below |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Good writer | | |

4) Identify and describe skills and experiences you possess.

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| Analytical Skills | Experiences | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Conduct public meetings | <input type="checkbox"/> Natural resources | <input type="checkbox"/> Local government |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Read plans | <input type="checkbox"/> Construction trades | <input type="checkbox"/> Business/Commercial |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Read maps | <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture | <input type="checkbox"/> Others? Please list below |

Download this application in MS Word format at www.uwsp.edu/landcenter/pubs.html

5) Please describe any special training you need that would assist you as plan commissioner.

- Reading maps and plans Running effective meetings Others? Please identify.
 Plan commissioner basics

6) Why would you like to be a Plan Commissioner? What do you hope to accomplish?

I have read and understand the description of plan commissioner duties and I am willing to serve should I be offered this appointment.

Candidate Signature _____ Date _____

An appointment will be made by (date).

Returned completed application to the (insert municipal name) Clerk by (insert date/time).

Extra pages may be attached to the application if needed.

2

This application is available for download on the Publications page at the Center For Land Use Education website as a Microsoft

Word document.
www.uwsp.edu/landcenter/pubs.html



APPENDIX C: QUALIFICATIONS AND DIVERSITY MATRICES

Qualifications Matrix

Modifying the Matrix:

The Qualifications Matrix can be downloaded as an Excel spreadsheet to accommodate modifications. Modifications should be made to the matrix to reflect locally appropriate qualifications.

Categories can be added to the matrix. If the local governing body identifies a qualification they want plan commissioners to possess, then that qualification should be added to the list.

Modifications can be made to the scoring system. Currently, the scoring is based on two scales. One scale provides a high score of 5 when the candidate possesses a

qualification and a 0 when the candidate lacks a qualification. The second scale is variable and scores candidates from 1-5. A score of 1 is low, while a score of 5 is high and shows that the candidate is qualified under that category.

Using the Matrix:

Use this matrix to help rate commissioner candidates based on various qualifications. List your candidates under the column called "Candidates." Then score them using the following blanks based upon commitment, interpersonal skills, and planning skills or expertise. Add up the scores to identify worthy candidates.

Download both matrices at:
www.uwsp.edu/landcenter/pubs.html

Instructions: Fill in the matrix with scores that rate the candidate's qualifications.			Qualifications									
			Commitment		Interpersonal Skills					Planning Skills/ Expertise		
			Past Service	Conflicting Activities	Clear Speaker	Good Listener	Open Minded	Detail Oriented	Objective/ Critical Thinker	Analytical Skills	Planning Experience	Policy Making
Scoring	Total	Hi	Y = 5 N = 0	Y = 0 N = 5	(1 - 5) low - high	(1 - 5) low - high	(1 - 5) low - high	(1 - 5) low - high				
Candidate												
Joe Example	39	50	5	5	4	4	5	3	4	4	3	2
Jane Example	40	50	5	5	4	5	5	3	4	3	3	3
		50										
		50										
		50										
		50										
		50										

