

Eight Things to Do Before Contacting Planning Staff on a New Site

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Given the controversial nature of the wireless industry as it pertains to local land use policy, it is important to build strong professional relationships with jurisdictional planners. A strong professional relationship with planning staff can help disassociate you from the unprepared rabble that typically represents the wireless industry, and in doing so may shift the planner's interactions with you from working against you and the use you represent, to working with you in a creative problem-solving way. The road to building a strong professional relationship with planning staff often begins with how well you work with the counter planners. Counter planners are the public face of the planning department and generally have a good sense of the jurisdiction's position on the "do's and don'ts" in terms of wireless telecommunications facilities. Being prepared and elevating the conversation from the basics casts you in the light of a professional rather than what they are accustomed to from the wireless industry. This allows build a strong professional relationship with planning staff.

Below are eight basic steps to take before making that initial contact with a counter planner to ensure you put your best foot forward as an informed planning consultant representing the wireless industry.

1. Cross Reference Search Ring to Aerial Photography

- Utilize your favorite aerial photography resource (e.g. Google Earth, Bing Maps, Yahoo Maps, etc.) to get a general sense of the development character of the search ring. You can easily spot vacant parcels, residential neighborhoods, and commercial strips on an aerial photo of the area that can refine your list of candidates.
- Google Earth is also a great tool to use to get a general sense of an area's topography that isn't immediately noticeable from an aerial photo.

2. Cross Reference Search Ring and Aerial Photo to Zoning Map

- Most jurisdictions place limitations on the siting of wireless facilities based on underlying zoning designations. It is useful to compare the jurisdiction's zoning map with your search ring and aerial photo. You may find that the large vacant lot you were eyeing in the middle of what seemed to be a commercial district was in fact zoned residential, in which wireless facilities are outright prohibited.

3. Review the Jurisdiction's Zoning Code and Wireless Ordinance

- Reviewing the zoning code should be one of the first things you do, and most jurisdictions have their zoning code freely available online. The zoning code will provide you with basic information such as what the overall height limit is for a particular zone, what the development setbacks are (if any), which zones allow wireless facilities, what types of designs are more favorable than others, and what the review process is for wireless facilities and application contents.
- On the rare occasions, you may find that a jurisdiction does not have an applicable wireless ordinance or section of the zoning code that regulates wireless facilities. In cases like this, only a conversation with planning staff can yield the information you would be looking for.

4. Search for Previous Wireless Cases

- Some jurisdictions have searchable development case file databases. If you are working in a jurisdiction that has a searchable database and are unfamiliar with the jurisdiction's stance on wireless, read through the staff reports or the meeting minutes if they are available. From this, you can easily glean hot-button topics of concern for the community and get a sense of staff's stance on wireless from these case files.

5. Visit the Site in Person

- No matter how much time you spend at your desk looking at aerials, reading the code, and looking at zoning maps, you will eventually hit a wall (and you should). Simply put, there is no substitute to actually visiting the search ring in person. Topography, sense of scale, and hard- and soft-scapes cannot be fully experienced through aerial photographs. The grove of trees that you saw on the aerial that would serve as a great backdrop to a 70-foot-tall stealth mono-tree may turn out to be only 20 feet tall. You might find a cupola or tall façade that did not show up on the aerial that would be perfect for a stealth building-mounted facility. Or you may have identified some buildings you thought were commercial, but are in fact mixed-use developments with savvy residents that will possibly oppose your project.

6. Utilize Your Connections

- If you have the privilege of working in a cooperative workplace such as Core Development Services where people have deep relationships within various jurisdictions, your colleagues might be one of your deepest knowledge bases. Ask your colleagues about their experiences in a certain jurisdiction. You may find that certain planners are easier to work with and certain jurisdictions are less wireless-friendly than others. Having a better sense of who you may be working with and what the jurisdiction's stance on wireless may be can help you save time in eliminating design proposals that would be non-starters.

7. Have a Probable Design in Mind

- After all your research, take some time to develop a probable design for your candidate sites. Bring photographs of the site and/or a sketch of what the design may look like. The sketch need not be a full set of zoning drawings but will serve to be more of a conversation tool to get a better sense of what staff may support. The advantage of bringing a rough sketch over a set of zoning drawings is that it gives the planner a sense of involvement and ownership in a project that may be to your benefit further in the process.

8. Compile Your Questions Before Speaking to a Planner

- To get the most out of your initial meeting with a planner you should come organized. Compile your initial questions to avoid having to go back or make multiple phone calls. The more organized you are, the better impression you will leave, and the more appreciative the planner will be.

These eight steps boil down to doing your research, being organized, and bringing something to initiate a meaningful dialogue. By following these steps, you can ensure that planning staff's first impression of you is not one of "just another wireless person", but rather "an informed land use consultant looking for clarifications and suggestions". In doing so, you can begin to build a strong professional relationship with planning staff.