

June 9 Strategic Planning Discussion: What Kind of Commission Do We Want to Be?

Opening Prompt:

“As we look to build our strategic plan, one of the key questions we need to answer is how active we as commissioners want to be in shaping priorities. There are two general paths we could take — and I’d love your thoughts on where we fall.”

1. Executive-Style Board

“We empower staff to lead, and we provide oversight and accountability.”

In this model, the commission functions more like a corporate or nonprofit board. Commissioners operate at a high level, focusing on governance, review, and decision-making — but the day-to-day priorities and execution are largely driven by staff.

Key Features:

- **Staff-Driven Priorities:** Staff researches potential designations, manages the study list, and recommends properties for action.
- **Commission as Oversight Body:** Commissioners evaluate, approve, or refine staff proposals, but do not typically initiate projects.
- **Strategic Focus:** Commissioners may help set broad strategic goals (e.g., increase representation of minority heritage sites), but rely on staff to pursue those goals.
- **Efficient Use of Time:** Meetings are focused on decision points rather than brainstorming or field discovery.
- **Limited Community Interaction:** Commissioners may not be regularly engaged with neighborhoods or scouting properties on their own.

Strengths:

- Respects and relies on staff expertise.
- Keeps meetings focused and efficient.
- Reduces burden on volunteer commissioners with limited time.

Challenges:

- Risks becoming reactive rather than proactive.
- May overlook properties that aren’t already on staff’s radar.
- Can limit commissioners’ personal sense of mission or impact.

2. Activist-Style Board

“We’re the engine behind discovery, advocacy, and preservation.”

In this model, the commission sees itself as a driving force in local preservation. Commissioners are expected to bring ideas, identify gaps, and advocate for action. Staff still supports and implements much of the work, but direction comes from the board itself.

Key Features:

- **Commissioner-Driven Priorities:** Commissioners propose properties, push for thematic initiatives, and shape the study list directly.
- **Field Discovery and Community Engagement:** Commissioners may attend neighborhood meetings, tour at-risk properties, or seek out overlooked sites.
- **Initiative-Based Working Groups:** Some commissions form subcommittees focused on areas like minority heritage, mid-century modern, or adaptive reuse.
- **Strategic Agenda-Setting:** The board plays a key role in defining preservation themes, underrepresented time periods, and geographical equity.
- **Partnerships and Advocacy:** Commissioners may be more publicly involved in building support for designation or funding preservation projects.

Strengths:

- Proactive and mission-driven.
- Empowers commissioners to use their expertise, networks, and passion.
- Helps surface overlooked or non-traditional preservation targets.

Challenges:

- Requires more time and initiative from each commissioner.
- Can strain staff capacity if direction constantly shifts.
- Risk of uneven commitment or unclear boundaries between board and staff roles.

Discussion Prompt:

“Where do we want to fall on this spectrum? Should we primarily support staff’s work and focus on decision-making, or do we want to be active partners in driving priorities and surfacing new designations ourselves?”