



Land Use Academy

Center for Land Use Education and Research

Advanced Legal Procedures Training 2023 Virtual Series



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COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE,
HEALTH AND NATURAL
RESOURCES

EXTENSION

2023 Advanced Training Series



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Feb. 2, 4 - 5:30pm

Bias, Predisposition and Conflicts

Atty. Rich Roberts, Halloran & Sage



Feb. 9, 4 - 5:30pm

Running a Meeting and Making a Decision

Atty. Ken Slater, Halloran & Sage



Feb. 16, 4 - 5:30pm

Fair & Affordable Housing

Atty. Mark Branse, Halloran & Sage



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CLEAR

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Water



Land Use &
Climate Resiliency



Geospatial Tools &
Training



Food Systems



STEM Education &
Local Conservation

<https://clear.uconn.edu>

Land Use Commissioner Training

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Water ▾ Land & Climate ▾ Mapping ▾ STEM ▾ Food ▾ **Training** ▾ Media ▾ About ▾

Training

Land Use Commissioner Training

The statewide Land Use Commissioner Training Calendar as well as ongoing virtual trainings to assist in new requirements for planning and zoning commissioners.

[LEARN MORE](#)

CT DEEP Training / Certificate Courses

A variety of trainings provided by CT DEEP to assist municipal staff in completing regulatory requirements as well as other informational courses.

[LEARN MORE](#)

UConn CLEAR Training Courses

Training courses offered to a wide audience range and spanning several topics, such as green stormwater infrastructure, land use, farming, climate resilience, and geospatial training.

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CLEAR Webinar Library

The CLEAR webinar library offers free webinars from over a decade. Users can pick and choose which webinars are most informative to them.

[LEARN MORE](#)

CT Land Use Commissioner Training

Today ◀ ▶ Sunday, January 29 🖨️ Week Month Agenda ▾

Thursday, February 2
4:00pm **Bias, Predisposition, and Conflict - CLEAR Land Use Academy Adv**

Thursday, February 9
4:00pm **Running a Meeting and Making a Decision - CLEAR Land Use Aca**

Thursday, February 16
4:00pm **Affordable Housing - CLEAR Land Use Academy Advanced Trainin**

Saturday, March 11
9:00am **CT Land Use Law for Municipal Land Use Agencies, Boards, Comr**

Showing events until 3/31. [Look for more](#)

Events shown in time zone: Eastern Time - New York

<https://clear.uconn.edu>

Land Use Academy

<https://clear.uconn.edu/lua>

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About the Academy

The Land Use Academy provides practical education for local land use decision makers in Connecticut. Our program focuses on the fundamental knowledge and skills needed to serve effectively on a local land use commission. The Academy is a partnership of UConn CLEAR, the CT Bar Association, and the CT Office of Policy and Management.



Land Use Academy

[LEARN MORE](#)



Basic Training

The *Legal Requirements and Procedures, Roles and Responsibilities* training has been split into two modules. This training refers to handouts that are typically used in the in-person training ([access these handouts](#)). You should download the [hypothetical case study, The Town of East Northport, CT](#), before starting the Legal Requirements and Procedures training modules. It is strongly recommended that any new commission or board members first complete a Basic Training course, such as that provided by the CLEAR Land Use Academy, before pursuing training in other topics of interest.

[LEARN MORE](#)



Advanced Training

We offer an all-day Advanced Training covering three topics in-depth: *Bias, Predisposition and Conflicts; Implementing and Enforcing Land Use Decisions*, and; *Running a Meeting and Making the Decision*. Over the years these topics have risen to the surface as issues that crop up continually in the life a land use commission member. The workshop is taught by [prominent land use attorneys](#) dealing with local land use issues in Connecticut communities.

[LEARN MORE](#)

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Please take note

- Training is NOT legal advice
- Discussion is encouraged but beating a dead horse is not
- Substantial interactive polling ahead
- Use the chat for questions or raise your virtual hand
- Do not use the chat for personal or political conversations
- Stay muted unless called upon
- Recording on <https://clear.uconn.edu/lua>
- Have fun



On what commission do you serve?

1. Planning
2. Zoning
3. Planning and Zoning
4. ZBA
5. Inland Wetlands and Watercourses
6. Conservation
7. Other
8. n/a



How long have you served?

1. Less than 2 years
2. 2-4 years
3. 5-10 years
4. More than 10 years
5. n/a



Are you elected or appointed?

1. Elected
2. Appointed
3. N/A



Have you taken the UConn LUA Basic Training within the past 2 years?

1. Yes
2. No



An Awesome Responsibility

Land Use Commissions make decisions that affect a community's quality of life for generations, where investment takes place, and an individual's or business's financial well being.



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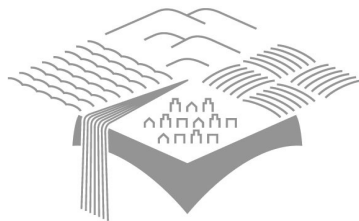
Sometimes there will be tough decisions...



Bias, Predisposition and Conflicts



Richard P. Roberts
Partner, Halloran & Sage LLP



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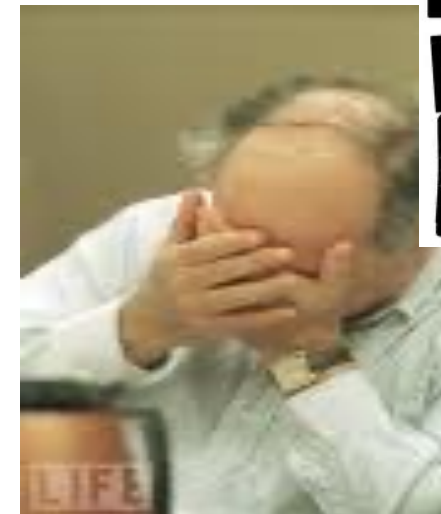


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Outline of Topics

- Conflicts of interest
- Perceived or potential conflicts of interest
- Prejudgment/predisposition
- Recusal



**BIG
LEGAL
MESS**

A planning commission member may represent his neighbor at a zoning commission hearing so long as he declares that he is a member of the planning commission but is not acting in that capacity.

- 1. True**
- 2. False**



CGS 8-11 Appearance and representation by Commission members

- No member of any zoning commission or board and no member of any zoning board of appeals or of any municipal agency exercising the powers of any zoning commission or board of appeals, whether existing under the general statutes or under any special act, shall appear for or represent any person, firm, corporation or other entity in any matter pending before the planning or zoning commission or board or said board of appeals or any agency exercising the powers of any such commission or board in the same municipality, whether or not he is a member of the board or commission hearing such matter.



What the State Statutes say

- **CGS 8-11 Disqualification of members of Zoning Commission and Zoning Board of Appeals**
- **CGS 8-21 Disqualification of members in matters before planning commissions**
- **CGS 22a-42(c) Municipal regulation of wetlands and watercourses**
- **CGS 7-148t. Conflict of interest for members of land use and purchasing commissions and boards**



CGS 8-11 Financial or Personal Interest

- **No member of any zoning commission or board and no member of any zoning board of appeals shall participate in the hearing or decision of the board or commission of which he is a member upon any matter in which he is directly or indirectly interested in a personal or financial sense.**



Appearance and Representation by Commission members

- When it's appropriate to represent your own interests
- Distinction between *appearing* at and *participating* in a hearing
- What steps need to be taken to avoid a conflict
- When the steps need to be taken
- Leaving the room



A Planning Commissioner's cousin has proposed a subdivision for a piece of land that is adjacent to the commissioner's fourth ex-wife. She is opposed to the development and states, correctly, at the hearing that the commissioner and his cousin are partners in an on-line business.

The commissioner has a conflict and should recuse himself.

1. True
2. False



In the event of a disqualification

- **Such fact shall be entered on the records of the commission or board**
- **A replacement shall first be made from alternate members pursuant to the provisions of sections 8-1b, 8-5a and 8-21**
- **The municipality may provide by ordinance that an elector may be chosen to act as a member of such commission or board in the hearing**



Conflict of Interest

- Different kinds of conflicts:
- Personal
- Financial
- Perceived or potential conflicts



Conflict of Interest

- Financial interest includes any financial interest of a commissioner or members of his immediate family. It also includes anything where there is a pecuniary benefit to the commissioner which may be greater than the benefit to the community at large or to a substantial segment of the community.



Conflict of Interest

- Personal interest includes close friendships or other association with the applicant



If a Commissioner has a perceived conflict of interest, he/she should:

1. State the nature of the conflict and assure the public and the applicant that it will not influence his/her judgment
2. State the nature of the conflict and say that it really isn't a conflict, just perceived
3. Not say anything because it isn't a conflict
4. Recuse himself/herself because the appearance of a conflict is just as bad as a real conflict
5. It depends on the circumstances



Conflict of Interest

- Perceived or potential conflicts—even though a conflict might not be an actual conflict, it may be perceived by the public to be one
- The action taken by the Commissioner may depend on the individual circumstances



Municipal Employee Conflict of Interest

A member of the City's public works department has a master's degree in planning and has been asked by the Earth First Party Town Committee Chairman to run for Zoning Commissioner. The town has no ordinance which prohibits her/him from serving. It is appropriate for her/him to run for this position.

- 1. Yes**
- 2. No**



Municipal Employees Serving on Commissions

- Under CGS 7-421(e) municipal employees may not serve as members of:
- any body which has responsibility for direct supervision of the employee
- board of finance
- zoning commission
- planning commission
- inland wetlands commission



HOWEVER: Municipality may enact an ordinance allowing employees to serve on zoning, planning or inland wetlands commissions

Bias vs. Predetermination

- “Bias” generally refers to a personal feeling of either favoritism or antipathy toward a particular person or position
 - “Predetermination” or “prejudgment” is a predilection to vote for or against a particular application
 - In certain cases bias and predetermination may both exist
- Definitions from *What is Legally Required* by Michael Zizka



Avoid the Appearance of Bias

- The Commission members must not create an atmosphere of hostility
- Be careful how your statements may be interpreted
- If you allow prejudice to flare at a public hearing, you are inviting the overturn of your decision and, even worse, money damages against your town



Avoid the Appearance of Bias

Especially critical where the flashpoint is a civil rights issue all its own: religion, free speech (adult book stores or other entertainment uses or political signs), ethnic background, race, disability.

Examples:

- Church, Synagogue, Mosque in a residential zone
- Affordable housing application
- “Half-way” house for juveniles transitioning out of prison or disabled persons recovering from alcohol or drug addiction
- “Half-way” house for Treatment facility for persons suffering from Alzheimer’s Disease
- Residential facility for people who are developmentally disabled



What's the Standard?

- Courts generally will not uphold a claim of bias or predetermination without compelling evidence



Predisposition

- Must not publicly take a position on granting or denial of an application before the application has been formally heard and considered
- Keep an open mind

got open mind?

Recusal

- Who decides if a member should recuse himself?
- What is the basis for recusal?
- Appointment of an alternate



Court Remedies

- Reversal of the commission's decision
- Remand to the commission for a new hearing or a new vote without the conflicted member(s) participating
- Other remedies that the court deems appropriate based on the facts including, potentially, ordering approval of an application or issuance of a permit
- Potential money damages if civil rights claims are made successfully
-



- Should be avoided
- How to respond if someone approaches you in a restaurant, store, at a party, etc.
- What to do if someone tells you something outside the meetings and you can't avoid it



Ex parte Communications

- Information from staff or commission experts
- Information from applicants or applicants' experts
- Information from the general public



Ex parte Communications

- Not all ex parte communications are impermissible
- Must be evidentiary and/or prejudicial
- Due process concerns, opportunity to rebut or cross-examine

Conflict of Interest

- “Local governments would ... be seriously handicapped if any conceivable interest, no matter how remote and speculative, would require the disqualification of a zoning official. ... [Courts] must, however, also be mindful that to abrogate a municipal action on the basis that some remote and nebulous interest may be present would be to deprive unjustifiably a municipality, in many important instances, of the services of its duly elected or appointed officials.”

Anderson v. Zoning Commission, 1968 CT Supreme Court



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Which is a conflict of interest?

1. A commission member owns a boat yard one-quarter mile from applicant's boat yard
2. A commission member owns a property 400-500 feet from the subject property
3. Both
4. Neither



Which is a conflict of interest?

1. A commissioner's father-in-law lives "across the street" from subject parcel and commissioner actively opposes application
2. A commission member is contract seller of property which is subject of the application
3. Both
4. Neither



Which is a conflict of interest?

1. The parents and sister of the commission chairman owned property adjacent to applicant's property. Parents and sister signed a petition protesting the project.
2. Members of the Inland Wetlands Commission are individually members of a land trust owning property adjacent to subject parcel
3. Both
4. Neither



Which is a conflict of interest?

1. A commission member was stockholder of a company providing accommodations similar to an applicant's proposal at a location nearly a mile away
2. A commissioner acts on application of a hospital where her deceased husband had been board president and honorary trustee
3. Both
4. Neither



Which is a conflict of interest?

1. A commissioner had “nodding or chatting acquaintance” with applicant and was tenant in apartment complex owned by an affiliate of applicant
2. A lawyer who is member of commission represents subdivision applicant even if he doesn’t participate in proceeding
3. Both
4. Neither



Predisposition

“The law does not require that members of zoning commissions must have no opinion concerning the proper development of their communities. It would be strange, indeed, if this were true. The decisive question ... is whether [a commissioner] had actually made up his mind, in advance of the public hearing, that he was going to approve the proposed change of zone regardless of any changes or arguments in opposition which might be urged at the hearing.”

Furtney v. Simsbury Zoning Commission, 1970 CT Supreme Court

Which is considered predisposition?

- A.** A commission “didn’t ask a lot of questions” and chairperson allegedly “steered the proceeding in a biased way”
- B.** A commission member attended a public forum where application was discussed
- C.** Both
- D.** Neither



Which is considered predisposition and/or bias?

- A.** A commissioner and applicant's engineer made a series of ethnic jokes
- B.** Comments indicating that the application was very similar to ones which had been already been denied twice
- C.** Both
- D.** Neither



Which is considered predisposition?

- A.** A commission chairman removed applicant's name from agenda and refused to attend FOIA hearing after complaint filed
- B.** A commissioner stated at hearing that he would not agree to grant a waiver "under any circumstances"
- C.** Both
- D.** Neither



Which is considered predisposition?

1. A commissioner's forceful and unfortunate statements during public hearing
2. A commissioner made motion from prepared statement after close of hearing and was little discussion
3. Both
4. Neither



Which is considered predisposition?

1. A commissioner initially recused himself saying “I don’t even want to hear this proposal” but later participated in process
2. A commissioner told applicant that he was “wasting his time and money” because he would never get approval
3. Both
4. Neither



Is it a conflict and what should be done?

Scenario #1

- An application has been submitted for zone change from residential to commercial. The neighbors present a protest petition against zone change but the commission votes unanimously in favor of zone change.
- The chairman of commission is husband of the applicant and he participates in hearing, states he has no financial interest, and votes in favor of application



Is it a conflict and what should be done?

Scenario #1

1. Since it was a zone change and he says he has no financial interest, he should state so for the record and vote
2. He should recuse himself because it is a conflict
3. He can participate in the discussion but should not vote
4. It depends



ANSWER: Recuse himself entirely from participating

Quotation from is Low v. Madison, 1948 CT Supreme Court:

- “Zoning restrictions limit the individual’s free use of his real estate in the interest of the general public good. The administration of power of that nature ... demands the highest public confidence. Anything which tends to weaken such confidence and to undermine the sense of security for individual rights which the citizen is entitled to feel is against public policy.”

Is it a conflict and what should be done?

Scenario #2

- A wetlands commissioner votes in favor of two subdivision applications and subsequently obtains a \$250,000 contract for road building in first subdivision.
- He then obtains \$170,000 contract for road building in second subdivision and votes in favor of third subdivision application, which decision is appealed.
- The commissioner testified that he hadn't decided whether or not to bid on road building work in third subdivision



Is it a conflict and what should be done? Scenario #2

- A.** It's the appearance of a conflict and he should state that it will not influence his decision
- B.** It's not a conflict because he may not bid on the work
- C.** It is an appearance of a conflict sufficient for him to recuse himself
- D.** It depends



ANSWER: The appearance of conflict of interest is sufficient for commissioner to have been disqualified

- Quotation from Brunswick v. Bethany IWWC, 1992 CT Appellate Court : “The law does not require proof that the interested commissioner actually acted wrongfully. The evil lies not in the wrongful act of the commissioner but ‘rather in the creation of a situation tending to weaken public confidence and to undermine the sense of security of individual rights which the property owner must feel assured will always exist’”.



Is it bias or predisposition? Scenario #1

- An application is made to planning and zoning commission for expansion of gravel mining operation.
- The chairman visited site “regularly”, followed trucks leaving property and interviewed a family for whom the applicants had done construction work.
- During the public hearing, two commissioners discussed potential impacts on wetlands beyond the scope of the application
- The wife of a commissioner who recused himself testified in opposition at the hearing and read a letter she had submitted to the commission.



Was there impermissible predisposition or bias? Scenario #1

1. Yes
2. No



ANSWER: NO

- Chairman's actions, although "zealous", did not prove predisposition or bias
- Statements of two commissioners during hearing was insufficient to prove predisposition or bias
- Wife's statements did not constitute "appearance" by husband at hearing – 22a-42(c) is different from 8-11 in that regard

Cioffoletti v. Ridgefield PZC, 1988 CT Supreme Court decision



Is it bias or predisposition? Scenario #2

- An application is submitted to historic district commission for approval of modifications to various exterior architectural features.
- A commission member recuses himself at the start of the public hearing.
- After applicant's presentation, the commissioner provides testimony against application as "an expert witness."
- At second hearing, the commissioner "continued to comment extensively" on the application as a member of the public and an expert in architecture.
- The commissioner submits eight-page, single-spaced letter detailing reasons to deny the application.
- The application is denied.

Was there impermissible predisposition or bias? Scenario #2

1. Yes
2. No



ANSWER: YES

- Level of participation by commission member violated applicant's right to fundamental fairness in the proceeding
- The recused commissioner was found to have a personal interest in the application by virtue of his "expert" testimony
- "While proceedings before zoning and planning boards and commissions are informal and conducted without regard to the strict rules of evidence ... they cannot be so conducted as to violate the fundamental rules of natural justice. ... In short, the conduct of the hearing must be fundamentally fair."

Barry v. Litchfield HDC, 2008 CT Appellate Court decision

Hypothetical Question #1

- Local businesses and residents form a non-stock corporation to advocate zoning policy against “big box stores”
- The corporation applies for amendment to regulations to require additional studies and information for certain large retail proposals
- The corporation requests that two members recuse themselves because of financial conflicts of interest
- One commissioner and his wife own a large parcel of property in the zone where “big box” was to be located and the developer held an option on it
- One commissioner is the son-in-law of another owner of a large parcel of property in the same zone and the developer held an option on it



Hypothetical #1:

Should the two commissioners recuse themselves ?

1. Yes
2. No

Hypothetical Question #2

- A business files an application for a particular commercial use, permitted as a special exception in that zone
- The Commission denies application because applicant had failed to obtain approval of architectural review board
- Approval of architectural review board not required by regulations for special exception
- Two weeks later, commission files an application to amend zoning regulations to prohibit the applicant's proposed use in that zone

**Hypothetical #2:
The commission's act to amend the regulations
was appropriate.**

1. Yes
2. No



QUESTIONS?

