SIMULATION DESIGN

Model Town Assembly: Two Days

The one-day hearing, then a second day on information the board asked for.

College and high school.

The one-day session below runs unchanged as day one. A colleague can run the short version, find that it works, and extend it later without rebuilding it.

The teaching problem

Students have almost no working model of local government, which is the level they know least about and the one most likely to affect them. The deeper lesson is that a local board is not an opinion poll. It is constrained decision-making: a zoning board applies the criteria in the ordinance, and a member who votes on preference alone is producing a decision that will lose on appeal.

If a colleague is going to try exactly one of these, it should be this one. *It needs no background knowledge, it works at twelve students and at forty, it is the easiest of the set for a high school class, and it can be built from the students' own town using documents that are a public record.*

The session

A planning board public hearing on a single application: the conversion of a vacant downtown building into forty apartments, with a variance requested for less parking than the ordinance requires. It is chosen because it is the most common real fight in a small town, because nobody in the room has a party line to follow, and because the ordinance supplies genuine criteria the board must apply.

The element that does the teaching

The ordinance is the whole design. Write a one-page excerpt giving four or five criteria for a variance: hardship, no detriment to the neighborhood, consistency with the comprehensive plan, adequate infrastructure. Hand it to everyone.

Then tell the board that a vote not grounded in a named criterion is a vote that loses on appeal, and tell the residents that “I do not want it” moves nothing while “criterion three is not met, and here is why” moves everything. That single constraint is what separates this from a debate about whether apartments are good.

The roles

- **Five board members**, who must vote and give reasons.

- **An applicant, an attorney and an engineer.**
- **A staff planner**, whose written recommendation is the anchor for the whole hearing.
- **Everyone else as residents**, each with a one-line interest, deliberately mixed: neighbors, the owner of a struggling downtown business, a renter who cannot find housing, a parent worried about the school budget.
- **Two students as local press**, filing a short story. It pays for itself.

Speaking turns

Board members ask questions, deliberate and vote, which is three. The applicant side presents and responds. Every resident gets a timed three minutes and should be told the clock is real. **This is the most naturally scalable format in the set**, because public comment absorbs any number of students.

What to name as artificial

Real hearings on an application like this run across several meetings and months. Say so, and say that the compression is why the applicant may amend once rather than returning in November.

The running order

0–10	Opening. The chair reads the application and the criteria, and says that comment not touching a criterion will be ruled out of order.
10–25	The staff planner's recommendation, then the applicant, the attorney and the engineer.
25–40	Board questions to the applicant side, by name.
40–50	**Break.** Residents organize, the applicant side confers.
50–75	Public comment, three minutes each, clock enforced.
75–90	**Board deliberation and vote in the open**, each member naming the criterion their vote rests on.
90–100	**Debrief.**

What the second day adds

Day one ends with the board voting **to continue the hearing rather than to decide**, which is what real boards usually do and which students find genuinely surprising. The board requests two specific things: a traffic study and a shadow analysis.

Between the days the applicant produces them, residents organize a petition, and the press story runs. Day two opens on the new information and decides.

The learning here is worth naming out loud in the debrief: delay is itself a decision, and the party with resources is the one that can afford the wait.

The trap in this format

It becomes a referendum on housing. The cure is the ordinance, enforced from the chair: rule comment out of order when it does not touch a criterion, exactly as a real chair would, and do it once early so the room adjusts.

Before you publish the agenda

1. Can you say in one sentence what the session is for, without using the word coverage?
2. Does the question genuinely divide the room, and can the body actually decide it?
3. Is every role down for at least two scheduled turns?
4. Have the demanding roles been spread deliberately rather than claimed?
5. Does someone know they are chairing, and have they been briefed?
6. Have the real questions gone out, with a line saying they are the real ones?
7. Is anything artificial about the setup named in the student document?
8. Is there a ten-minute break in the middle for students to find allies, and is the room arranged so they can stand up and move?
9. Is the closing act something the room can watch fail?
10. Is the debrief in the running order, with time of its own?

The three floor rules to read aloud, and a minute-by-minute template, are in Running Order, Floor Rules, and the Day-Of Check on the Class-Based Simulations page. The topics below are defaults. Replace them with whatever is live when you run the session; what should not be replaced is the one structural element in each design that does the teaching.