

PUBLIC MEETINGS AND HEARINGS

Public Meetings are among the least effective of all community relations techniques. They tend to create an atmosphere of "us versus them." Citizens usually have little opportunity to have their questions answered, and that often may result in open hostility. These kinds of meetings can become quite adversarial and confrontational. Also, remember that the media is often in attendance which may encourage confrontation and not communication. This is the perfect environment for agitators to score points.

Also, organizations often make the mistake of letting a governmental agency take the lead in communicating to the community — often with unpredictable results. By the time a public meeting or hearing is held, most positions have solidified. Therefore, it is important to complete your process before required public hearings.

MEETING MANAGEMENT

Why things go wrong:

- Wrong Point of View – "We know what's best."
- Passive Involvement – "It's the agency's meeting."
- Talking v. Listening – "We'll answer questions later."
- Poor Preparation – "Where did all these people come from?"
- Wrong Forum – "This gym is really noisy."

MEETING STRATEGIES

- Take the initiative.
- Keep meetings small.
- Let people "vent."
- Be honest.
- Be credible.
- Reach out to the opposition. Before the meeting, shake their hands.
- Lead the process, not the content.
- Give audience "ownership" of the content.
- Involve the public at key milestones.
- Douse small fires before they become big fires.
- Build confidence with good, visual technical info.
- Identify follow-up.
- Remember people care most about self-interest issues: survival, health, pocket book issues, peer recognition, belonging.

BEFORE THE MEETING

- Monitor public opinion – media, phone calls, mail, general impressions.
- Determine desired outcome.
- Involve community leaders.
- Pick location carefully.

- Schedule meeting at a convenient time.
- Announce meeting in understandable language.
- Write in simple statements.
- Present information clearly.

CONDUCTING THE MEETING

- Be aware of time.
- Be graphic and visual.
- Use people-friendly words.
- Be flexible.
- Be empathetic and available.

WHEN THERE IS CONFLICT

You should attempt to solve problems before they come up at a public forum. A conflict resolution approach such as that spelled out in Fisher and Ury's book, *Getting to Yes* (paperback) can help you resolve problems early.

- Limit comments (managing the process) will prevent monopolizing.
- Recognize problems at the start.
- Keep the agenda on track.
- Keep control: stay cool.
- Ask questions.
- Set time aside to resolve problems.
- Call a recess if necessary.

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Communicating with Communities

A C4M POCKET GUIDE



COMMUNICATING WITH COMMUNITIES

We live in an age where the tools for communicating have never been greater — cell phones, chat rooms, pagers, voice messaging, video conferencing and so on. But the impacts of this electronic commerce are not community friendly — over-emphasis on personal space, individual rights, riskless living and governmental obligations to service private wants.

The result is an age of NIMBY: (Not In My Backyard) when it comes to the siting of all kinds of public and private projects from fast-food outlets to incinerators to airport expansions to power lines and waste disposal sites.

For the last 30 or more years people in communities have been learning how to fight “smart” when taking on public and private developers to stop what they consider undesirable land uses. These “Sputnik Era parents” understand zoning and other administrative processes and they know how to use them. They know how to leverage the media to influence politicians. They are not afraid of massive technical reports and printouts. Going to court is a constant option.

AS A RESULT, PROJECTS OFTEN ARE:

- Unrealistically perceived by the community.
- Easy to stop or stall.
- Likely to create some conflict.
- Supported only by those who will immediately benefit.

TODAY’S CITIZENS:

- Want to have a say in decisions that affect them.
- Will not be extremists if they are part of the planning process.
- May not participate if they are against the process.
- Need to be sought out.
- May even have some good ideas worth implementing.

THE PROCESS IS THE MESSAGE

Attempting to site projects in today’s hostile public environment is more difficult than ever before. But success is possible, if those people who are potentially affected feel that you are dealing credibly and fairly with them. The theory, proven many times over in many situations, is that if those who will be affected perceive that you are seriously seeking to inform them and get their input, they will be less resistant to fight, even if it means they will be adversely affected.

Unfortunately, many organizations are not willing to run this kind of process. It takes people. It takes time and it costs money. But consider the alternative: law suits, bad publicity and political waffling.

Some basic truths of community relations:

- The process is the message.
- People get involved in proportion to perceived impact of the project.
- The best input usually comes AFTER a decision has been made.
- Organizations are often perceived as only “going through the motions.”
- Good community relations is cheaper than bad or none.

In setting up public involvement process, there are a number of important steps:

[1] ASSESS THE ISSUE

- First, it is important to gauge what the potential impact of an issue will be. If you want to site a mental health facility in an upper income neighborhood, you can easily anticipate trouble. On the other hand, if you are going to site a fast-food outlet on a commercial strip, you probably won’t be expecting problems. But you really don’t know unless you do some initial leg work:
 - Visually survey the area — look at how land is used, especially at the interfaces.
 - Talk to local people — elected and appointed local officials, chamber, service club, public interest group types, local reporters.
 - Identify what has been the fate of similar activities in the area.
- You may find the people in the neighborhood are very enlightened concerning mental health — or, you may find a high level of frustration with the overabundance of fast-food outlets that are creating parking and noise problems.

Steps to Take:

- Identify interested officials, citizens and organized groups.
- Research local newspaper articles.
- Identify those factors that can influence public perceptions, including:
 - Nearness of area residences to the site.
 - Proximity of schools or playgrounds to the site.
 - Visibility of the site.
 - Presence of agricultural uses near the site.
 - Location of recreational facilities near the site.

- Interview:
 - State agency officials (health, environmental, transportation).
 - Local officials.
 - Citizen group representatives.
 - Area residents not affiliated.
 - Local business representatives.
 - Local civic groups and neighborhood associations.

[2] IDENTIFY CONCERNS

- What makes the site unique?
- What are key community characteristics?
- What is the perception of the proposed activity?
- What is the history of similar activities in this area?
- Have active, vocal leaders emerged on this or similar issues?

[3] BUILD A COMMUNITY RELATIONS PLAN

1 – Community and Issue Background

You need to evaluate who the key constituencies are, what their positions are, and most importantly, how likely they will be to use their power for or against your project. We call this last factor “salience.”

2 – Activities Planned and Timing

Timing is crucial in community relations. The earlier you move forward with the communications and involvement process, the less expensive it is. If you wait until you’re digging or going for permits, the costs go up and the chance of resolving conflicts can become intractable.

3 – Contact List of Key Community Figures

A continual process of data base development is crucial. Names come from directories, zip codes, commercially purchased disks and plain, old-fashioned leg-work.

[4] MAKE YOUR PROCESS VISIBLE

- Informal educational meetings that encourage Q & A.
- Outreach to affected parties.
- Well-promoted web sites.
- Periodic follow-up via letters and phone calls.
- On-scene information office.
- Open houses/tours.
- Hotlines.
- Community media.
- Workshops.
- Conflict resolution sessions.