A "BOTTOM UP" PRIMER

A GUIDE TO CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

WASHINGTON STATE GROWTH MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

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A "Bottom Up" Primer

The 1990 Growth Management Act (GMA) requires "early and continual citizen participation" in the development of local comprehensive plans. Effective citizen participation in comprehensive planning benefits a community by providing:

- early opportunities to discover and to work together on difficult issues;
- community "ownership" of the adopted plan;
- a willingness to support subsequent implementation; and
- improved community esteem through awareness, education, and empowerment.

Unfortunately, without continual citizen participation throughout the planning process, officials may encounter:

- unanticipated opposition at the public hearing or adoption stage of the planning process;
- little or no support for the adopted plan and implementation;
- resentment toward planners and the planning process; and
- failure to identify issues community members consider important.

This manual will assist you in your efforts to involve the public in the comprehensive planning process. It is a step-by-step guide to help you establish effective citizen participation at all stages. Use it to avoid some of the pitfalls you might encounter without participation.

If you have an ongoing citizen participation process, use the manual as a reference guide. You may find new ideas or techniques you'd like to add.

If your community has little or no history of effective citizen participation, use this manual as an instructional guide. It contains "how to" steps, sample forms, and other resources.

The one constant you can count on when it comes to citizen participation is this: no two meetings or small groups are the same. By its very nature, participation implies unpredictability, variety, and the unexpected.

Relax, have fun, go with the flow, but give it your best shot. Whatever the outcome, it will be better if you have involved people from the beginning. Even when you are dealing with the most controversial issues and the most contentious people, the final product can benefit from having early and continual participation.

Please refer also to the counterpart A GUIDE TO COMMUNITY VISIONING in this series for additional tips on how to involve the public in your planning process.

What is Citizen Participation?

It used to be, if you failed to read the public notice in the paper and you missed the public hearing, you relinquished your chance to be heard at city hall. (In fact, you increased your opportunity to be ignored.) That was about the extent of early "citizen participation" efforts.

Now, with activism on the rise and the public's increased understanding of the effect of environmental, land use, and transportation issues, citizen involvement starts way before final testimony at a public hearing. In our democratic society, we take for granted the right to speak out and be heard. We are a diverse and vocal people whose opinions continually shape public policy.

Effective citizen participation, whether by mandate or choice, expands the opportunities for citizens to discuss public policy and to influence officials. Because our communities are made up of many "publics", we cannot expect to reach consensus on every issue. Officials must weigh the value of public input as they make decisions.

In today's complex world, the objectives of citizen participation must be clear. To keep people involved, we must make the best use of both innovative techniques and traditional methods.

Relationship to Comprehensive Planning

The Growth Management Act specifies any county (and the cities within the county) must have a comprehensive plan by July 1, 1993, if it has the following:

- Both a population of 50,000 or more and a population increase of ten percent or more over the last ten years (these counties are King, Pierce, Snohomish, Clark, Kitsap, Thurston, Whatcom, Skagit, Island, Chelan, Clallam, Yakima, and Grant); or
- A population increase of more than 20 percent for the last ten years regardless of current population. Under this provision, three counties could have chosen not to plan under the Act if they "opted out" by December 31, 1990. (These counties are Jefferson, Mason, and San Juan, and they have all chosen to plan under the Act.)

In any of the remaining 23 counties in Washington State, a majority vote of the County Commissioners to plan in accord with the Act triggers the requirement that the county, as well as all the cities within that county, plan according to the Act. Benton, Douglas, Franklin, Kittitas, Pacific, Walla Walla, Ferry, Pend Oreille, and Columbia Counties are planning under the Growth Management Act.

The Act also specifies planning goals for the comprehensive plans:

- encourage development in urban areas;
- reduce of sprawl;
- encourage multi-modal transportation;
- encourage affordable housing;
- encourage economic development throughout the state;
- encourage retention of open space and recreation;
- protect the environment;
- encourage citizen participation and coordination between communities;
- provide adequate public facilities and services;
- encourage historic preservation;
- protect private property rights;
- provide timely and fair permit processing; and
- maintain and enhance natural resource-based industries.

Participating counties and cities are required either to enact a new comprehensive plan or to update an existing one.

In addition, the Act calls for counties and cities to employ innovative techniques, coordinate with counties and cities with common borders, and designate urban growth areas.

Some of the details of the Act's requirements are explicit, including the mandate for "early and continuous public participation in the development and amendment of comprehensive land use plans and development regulations implementing such plans."

In the process of preparing comprehensive plans and amendments, communities need to examine their choices carefully and to thoughtfully assess the impacts of those choices.

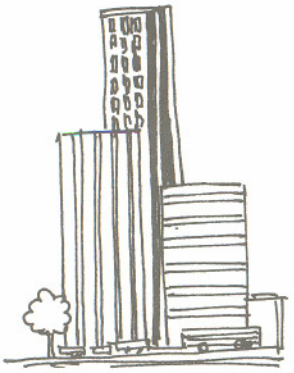
The Act leaves no doubt that comprehensive planning is serious business worthy of citizens' attention and participation. The implication is clear: comprehensive planning nearly always deals with tough issues and complex trade-offs.

Comprehensive planning is a balancing act. It invites disagreement among community members whose differing, and sometimes competing, interests are at stake. Although healthy disagreement can lead to more equitable solutions, comprehensive planning can evoke suspicion even among the most trusting.

This is a reason public involvement, from the beginning of the planning process to the end, is required; it establishes an early communication link among officials, community members, and planning staff. This requirement assumes that continual participation will produce a better and more acceptable plan.

Elements of Effective Citizen Participation

There is no "best" way to design a citizen participation process. Effectiveness depends on many variables, but there are certain elements that make a process work. You need to know the audience, set clear objectives, and plan a targeted strategy using carefully selected tools.



Know Your Audience

An effective process reaches out to a wide range of audiences. Your process must include a consistent message, but will need different approaches to reach all kinds of people from the broad general public to the most affected groups and individuals.

Among identifiable audiences are local officials, special interest groups, businesses, and civic organizations. Depending on the issue, other audiences include those most likely to be affected by the proposed change such as land owners, surrounding neighborhoods, or nearby communities.

As with most issues, the audiences will have differing perspectives. Developers wanting to build multifamily housing may clash with adjacent single-family residents. Officials seeking to limit heights to maintain "small town character" may have to reason with residents and commercial property owners. What one views as open, wooded green space, another sees as undeveloped vacant land.

With each identified audience, your message must be tailored to meet certain needs. Some audiences need basic education about the purpose and principles of comprehensive planning; others need to know how and when to influence decision makers on specific issues.

Set Clear Objectives

No matter what the level of interest or involvement, information for audiences must be accessible and easy to understand. Your objectives must be clear and the messages targeted. What is it you want to accomplish?

During your planning process, you will find opportunities to inform people about meetings and events. You want to educate the community about proposed changes to the plan and how they might be affected. Sometimes, in anticipation of a heated debate, you will want to provide outlets for venting, or in other words, opportunities to let people express their frustration or to speak what is on their mind.

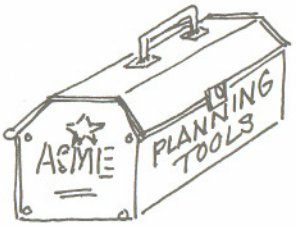
The need for citizen participation ranges from providing people with useful information to giving them an opportunity to take action for or against a proposal.

Once you clarify your objectives and decide if you need to inform, educate, involve, or empower your community, your messages will become clear. Take time to do this and avoid confusion later on.

A process designed for early and continual participation takes place over time. Early involvement includes "community visioning" at the beginning of the planning process. Continual participation means creating meaningful opportunities along the way for people to influence the outcome of the plan.

The objective of citizen participation in the planning process is to produce a better plan. You want one that reflects community values and support for implementation.

Consider Tools A to Z



There are many ways to collect and share information. When using any of them, your objectives are to be credible, fair, and open to suggestions. Listen and respond. Build trust.

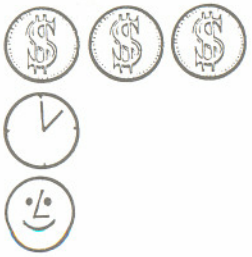
- Remember to keep printed materials (including news releases) simple and easy to read. Design them to catch attention and to tell your story so people understand the issue and/or the need to get involved.

- If you're planning meetings, think about the location, date, and time. These are crucial to your success. Plan meetings when the most people can come.

- If the meeting is not a formal public hearing, choose an interactive format. Consider open houses, small group discussions, and other informal formats.

Mix and match the following tools to meet your participation needs. Each is rated by accompanying symbols according to the amount of time, money, and people needed to make the tool effective. The number of symbols indicates the amount of resources needed.

Advertisements



Place a paid display ad in your local/regional paper to advertise an important event. Run it a week or so ahead in a prominent location. Include time, date, place, and meeting objectives. Check deadlines in advance, and to save money, prepare camera-ready art work.

Brochure

Brochures can be used as flyers, self-mailers, or hand outs. If you have computer graphics, you can prepare camera-ready work. For maximum effect, print brochures with more than one color. If your information is good for about a year, you can justify the cost of printing a brochure.

Cable Reader Board

Write the copy for a meeting notice and submit it to your local or nearby cable station.

Committees

Citizen advisory committees can be effective when their objectives are clear and members understand their roles. Their job is to advise and make recommendations to officials.

Community Calendar

Use the local or regional newspaper's calendar of events to publicize meetings. It's free. Check deadlines.

Display

Ask to use display boards at shopping centers, libraries, schools, and other public buildings to educate people. Have young people make exhibits.

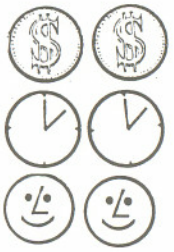
Field Trip

Take a group on a field trip or walking tour of areas under discussion. Map out the trip in advance so you can point out the issues. Borrow a van or rent a small bus. Take several trips if a lot of people want to go.

Flyer

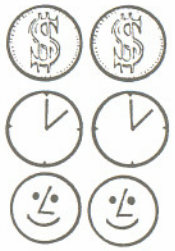
A flyer is a simple and inexpensive way to get the word out fast. Use flyers as meeting notices or informative handouts. Do a flyer in-house on colored paper. When appropriate, and to save postage, combine flyers with regular mailings such as utility bills.

Focus Groups



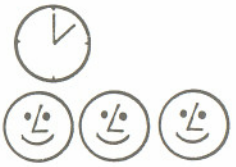
Ask six to ten people to discuss an issue. Prepare two or three questions in advance and facilitate a two-hour meeting. Conduct several, if time permits.

Insert



A newspaper tabloid insert is a good way to conduct public education or distribute a questionnaire, meeting notice, or detailed report.

Interview

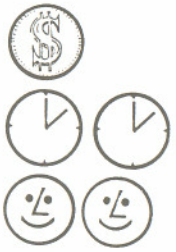


Collect information in one-to-one interviews with key community people. Design the questionnaire in advance. Keep on the topic and limit interviews to about 40 minutes.

Invitation

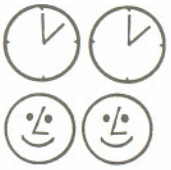
For a special meeting or a small audience, a nicely printed invitation (done in-house) can set the tone for your event.

Mailing List



Have sign-up sheets at every meeting and create mailing lists to keep people informed. Get a software package to print lists and labels.

Media Relations



Select one person to work with the media. It could be a staff member or a designated committee member. Discuss what you hope to accomplish with the media and develop a plan.

Learn the standard rules for working with the media. Remember, the media is not in the public relations business. Reporters do not have to portray you or your project in a good light. Provide accurate information and abide by each medium's guidelines and deadlines. Establish a relationship based on trust and dependability.

Return calls, give accurate information, and if you do not know the answer to something, say so. Submit news releases to the media about meetings and issues. Send them to all papers, television, and radio stations in your area. Include specifics about who, what, when, where, and why.

Newsletter

Newsletters can be time-consuming, but when an issue deserves continual reporting, write one. This is your chance to tell the story. Be accurate, conversational, and current.

This takes good writing skills, time, and resources. Publish it regularly or as needed. Look at some examples and choose a format you like.

Remember to submit articles to business and civic organization newsletters. This is a good way to reach target audiences with a specific message. You can also submit meeting notices for publication in weekly (church) bulletins.

Open House

Open houses are a fun and lively way to stimulate interest in your planning process. Invite people to meet informally with officials, out-of-town guests, or local authorities to discuss selected topics.

Think about scheduling a half-day Saturday gathering or plan one to precede a public hearing. Put maps, charts, and other pertinent materials you've collected on display.

Serve refreshments if possible.

Opinion Article

Ask your local editor to let you write an "op/ed" piece for the newspaper. This is an opportunity to express an opinion or make an appeal on behalf of an issue or meeting.

Poster

Colored posters can be expensive to design, print, and distribute. Get to know your local silk screen artist. To be effective, posters must be displayed in prominent places. Be sure to remove them right after the event.

Polling

Polling is a good way to find out general or specific information. Telephone interviews, in-depth statistically valid questionnaires, or short open-ended surveys are examples of how to poll people.

Get professional help if you do not have expertise in design, tabulating, analysis, and reporting. To be effective, any polling technique must have clear objectives, be unbiased, and produce usable results. Refer to your library for books on specific polling techniques.

Public Hearing

Review of your comprehensive plan will require one or more public hearings. They often are confrontational and unfulfilling. Make yours as friendly as possible.

Public Meeting

Make sure your public meetings do not conflict with other scheduled events. Avoid Monday and Friday nights. Provide babysitting if possible.

Make sure seating, lighting, and sound is good. Vary your format depending on the audience, issue, and objectives.

Public Notice

Posting a public notice is a legal requirement for advertising public hearings. Different agencies have required "notice periods."

Public Service Announcement (PSA)

A PSA is free and a good way to promote a meeting or a questionnaire. Radio stations commit a certain amount of air time to public service. Ask your local station how to go about getting on the radio.

Reader Boards

Ask local merchants to put announcements on reader boards. This is a good way to "canvass" the town with information.

Research

Research can be fun. Make it a task for history buffs, librarians, or students. Research news clippings for information about past planning processes or major events.

Talk to old-timers, former officials, and news reporters to piece together your story. Read current plans and analyze census and other statistical data.

School Handout

Ask local school officials if you can send a flyer home with school children. This is a good way to get parents to come to a meeting.

Slide Show

Start with a clear picture of the story you want to tell. Write the script, then take the slides. Limit talking to eight or ten seconds per slide. This is a good way to take a complicated message to lots of people.

Use slide shows with neighborhood, business, civic, and church groups. Enlist volunteers with good "people skills" to field questions.

Small Groups

There are a number of techniques to help groups discuss issues, reach consensus on a procedure, or do problem-solving. Divide a large audience into small groups to encourage lots of participation. As with polling, refer to your library for books on specific techniques.

Speakers Bureau

Make arrangements with local organizations to send a speaker to a monthly meeting (take your slide show). Prepare an outline in advance. State your purpose for being there, make three points to back up your purpose, summarize your points, and conclude with questions from the audience.

Be brief, entertaining, to the point, and open.

Talk Show

If your local radio station has a talk show, inquire about an interview. This is a great way to promote meetings and questionnaires. Take questions you want to answer on the air. Write your "script" in advance so you won't forget time, date, place, etc.

Task Force

Appoint an ad hoc task force to work on a single issue or special topic in a limited amount of time, often comprised of people with expertise or a special interest in the topic.

Telephone Tree

If your questionnaire returns are lagging, form a telephone tree of local volunteers to remind people to send in their questionnaires.

Thank You Notes

Make a lasting impression on those who have helped you. Thank them for their time, generosity, or advice. It only takes a minute to say thanks and the results are well worth the time.

Videos

A well-made (but not necessarily professional) video production can liven up a meeting. Consider having young people produce a video with music to relay their concerns.

Volunteer Projects

Enlist students, elders, the home-bound, or scout troops to conduct interviews, post signs, tally questionnaires, make phone calls, and send mailings.

Windshield Survey

Take a drive around the town to make a needs assessment and to collect information about land uses, zoning violations, traffic revisions, street improvements, and housing conditions.

Make notations on a map and share the information at meetings.

Word of Mouth

Tell your story. Word of mouth still is the most effective way to share information. Educate and inform family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. Tap their civic pride and get them involved.

Workshops

Conduct workshops on complicated technical issues. Invite people to come together with experts to work on issues. This can be effective at the implementation stage to influence decision-makers.

Youth Groups

Use young people whenever you can. They need to know how towns and cities are planned. They also have a stake in the community's future.

Zip Codes

Learn everything you can about bulk mailings and carrier sort routes. Your local post office will teach you how to do mass mailings. You can save money on postage by taking advantage of these services.

Who, What, When, and How: Tips and Techniques

Working with Committees

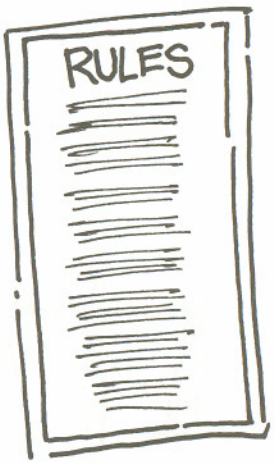
It may be appropriate to form a Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) to advise officials on updating or developing a comprehensive plan. Staffing committees takes time, but they are a traditional way to involve people. Committee participation can build esteem and pride among community members. Poorly chaired and unfocused committees can leave members feeling unfulfilled and annoyed. Work to make the committee experience worth the time and effort.

You might add to an existing group or start from scratch. Whichever you choose, keep these tips in mind:

- **The Selection Process**

  Hand pick committee members from a broad representation of the community's civic, business, and neighborhood groups and individuals. Have the committee reflect community composition with regard to demographics: age, race, income, and education. Geographic distribution for residents as well as businesses is important.

- **Explain the Commitment**



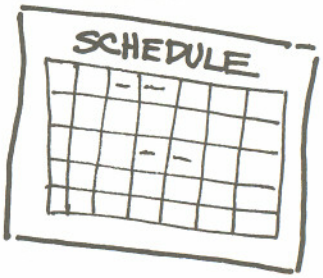
  When issuing the invitation, be specific about the time commitment (months, years). Tell people how often you plan to meet. You want people to be able to stick with you until the work is done.

- **Establish Ground Rules**

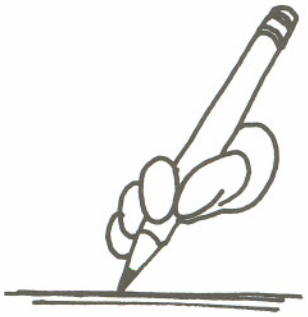
  Develop and agree on set procedures. This important first step not only builds trust and implies equity, it will set the tone for decision making, record keeping, and overall participation.

  Ground rules attempt to make each committee member's contribution valuable and at the same time move the group toward its goal. Ground rules must be simple, friendly, and brief.

- **Set a Schedule**



  Decide early where and how often to meet. Make meetings accessible to the public.



- **Keep Good Records**

  Appoint a dependable record keeper to keep accurate records of attendance, decisions, and discussions.

- **Get a Leader**

  Choose someone to chair the committee or select a staff facilitator to preside over meetings.

- **Set Objectives**

  Make sure committee members have a clear charge, a realistic time frame, and the resources to do their work.

- **Agree on How to Make Decisions**

  Decide whether to use a consensus or voting method. When it's time to make decisions, abide by the ground rules and the decision making process.

  Remember the task. Committees give advice and make recommendations. Decision makers make the final decisions.

- **Memorize Three Rules**

  1) Start the meeting on time; 2) have an agenda and stick to it; and 3) stop at the appointed time.

Seven Ways to be an Effective Chair

- **Encourage Balanced Participation**

  Make sure everyone gets a chance to speak. Don't let a few people dominate the meetings.

- **Deal with Conflict**

  Don't let hard feelings simmer. Listen for opportunities to clarify information. If things get hot, call a time out.

- **Summarize Meetings at Closing**

  Ask "What have we accomplished today?" Get agreement on your progress and what is left to do.

- **Show Respect for Members**

  Value each member's contribution. Make it acceptable to differ with the group. Guide discussions to allow equitable participation.

- **Maintain Impartiality**

  The chair must keep the meeting on track and make sure the committee is working toward their goal. Be careful not to use your position as the chair for your own platform or agenda.

- **Come Prepared**

  Read minutes, reports, and other documents in advance. Review the agenda and make sure participants are prepared.

- **Show Appreciation for Group Work**

  Be gracious and appreciative of the committee's work. Send thank you notes, recognize special contributions, and reward extra effort.

Learn Facilitation Skills

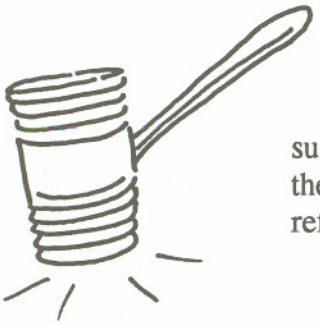
Facilitators bring special skills to a meeting. The major difference between a facilitator and a chair is this: facilitators remain neutral, impartial, and free from bias. They stay away from the content.

Facilitation is the art of moving meetings along using flexibility, intuition, and humor. Facilitators set the tone for the meeting. At the very beginning, they work to establish a level of trust and a spirit of cooperation. Facilitators bring a non-threatening, casual, and sincere style to meetings. A effective facilitator is able to:

- set the agenda and ground rules;
- moderate flow of discussion;
- clarify information;
- help people listen to each other and share information;
- keep the group focused on a common task;
- pace discussions (speed up/slow down);
- ensure that all points of view are expressed;
- help the group find win/win solutions or reach a consensus;
- deal with problem people (interrupters, monopolizers, late-comers); and
- bring the meeting to adjournment.

During discussions, a facilitator plays three key and distinct roles:

- opens agenda items or discussion topics;
- intervenes during the discussion to call on people and assist the group; and
- brings closure to the discussion or task.



As an objective presence, facilitators moderate heated discussions and summarize the main points along the way. They also state the progress of the meeting by stopping along the way and asking the group to pause and reflect on what has been accomplished.

A master facilitator (or leader) transforms hostility and resistance into productive discussion and problem solving. Resistance is natural. It is a form of self-protection and can show up as indifference, silence, fear, anger, or criticism. A facilitator uses three principles to respond to resistance:

- recognizes it;
- accepts and acknowledges it; and
- suggests ways to reduce or address it.

Resistance can be felt and seen almost as soon as people arrive. Accept this. Do not react and do not fight resistance by becoming defensive or resistant yourself. Listen and observe with an open mind.

Allow some time for people to express feelings or concerns. Stay calm. Ask people to attack the problem and not each other.

Look for the causes of resistance. Some examples might be lack of good information, mistrust of the process or officials, and feelings of powerlessness. Respond openly and honestly to these claims:

- provide information;
- ask participants how to improve the process; and
- assure them that their participation can influence the outcome.

Finally, use appropriate humor to lessen anxiety and create rapport. Humor helps a group transcend feelings of isolation or alienation. Laughing at ourselves relieves tension and keeps us from becoming too serious. Use gentle, uplifting humor to lighten the mood.

Identify the Obstacles Early On

It is great when everybody agrees and plans sail through the process unchallenged. How often does that happen?

Disagreement about issues is natural. Your job is to anticipate what kind of obstacles and opposition your process will encounter.

It only takes a couple of angry, hostile, or obstinate people to hold up adoption or implementation of a plan.

As part of the participation process, identify the opposition early and make every effort to understand their concerns. Put yourself in their place. Work steadily with them to clarify issues.

Use the following excerpt on "informed consent" from Hans and Annemarie Bleikers' Citizen Participation Training Notebook to help you diminish the obstacles.

> *"Informed consent is the willingness of opponents to go along with a course of action that they still oppose. This is based on the theory that most projects can be held up or stopped by one or two people with strong interests in the outcome."*

An effective citizen participation process immediately identifies those most opposed to a project, and then determines why they are opposed and where there may be areas of agreement.

Strong opposition is usually based on value differences with regard to rights, freedoms, and liberties. Confronting these differences and acknowledging the weaknesses of a plan up front can help you reach informed consent.

Conduct a Successful Public Meeting

You can create a positive sense of community involvement with an old time "town meeting." Use such a meeting to report questionnaire results, review alternative proposals, or celebrate completion of an important task.

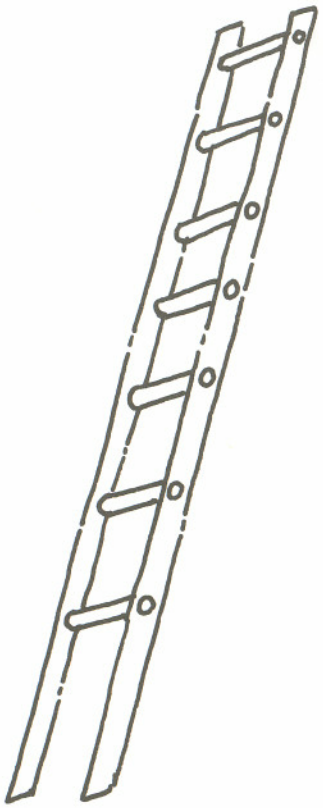
The basic ingredients for a successful meeting include:

- good advance publicity;
- convenient date, time, and location;
- well thought out agenda;
- well organized and capable chair or facilitator; and
- follow-up; and
- sign-up sheet to develop mailing list.

Meetings should leave people with a feeling of accomplishment. Make the objectives of the meeting clear and try to stick to them. Be open to comments and don't be too concerned if participants are not in complete agreement on issues. The purpose is to involve and educate your community. As your process continues and issues become clearer, people may come closer together on issues and solutions.

Use as many visuals as you can to liven up the setting. Refer to maps and charts when talking about planning issues. Be careful not to make too many assumptions about what people understand. Be informative, and never talk down to your audience. Say thank you at the end.

Learn about Empowerment



Sherry Arnstein's "Participation Ladder" says we should know the difference between the "empty ritual" of token participation and giving people the real power they need to affect the outcome. She uses a ladder to illustrate the levels of participation ranging from manipulation to citizen control. For instance, Arnstein advises communities against using citizen advisory committees as "rubber stamps" or public relations vehicles.

She points out the limitations of one-way communication tools (meetings and surveys) if they are used only to gather information and not to share it. Arnstein supports the establishment of partnerships between citizens and officials to allow give and take, shared planning, and opportunities to make recommendations and present alternatives to decision makers.

Conclusion

It is easy to feel overwhelmed now that you know so much, but working with people via citizen participation brings its own reward. Once you see understanding and appreciation on faces in the audience, you will know it has been worth the effort.

Comprehensive planning is tough. It brings out the best and the worst in us. The planning process asks people to give things up, to accept change, and to tolerate differences.

It also paves the way for predictability and equity. A good plan looks at the whole and responds to the public welfare. A good planning process invites all who are willing to participate in the plan's formation, adoption, and implementation.

Use whatever works for you to produce the best process and plan for your community.

Appendix A

Survey

Design: _____

_____

_____

_____

Publicity: _____

_____

_____

_____

Distribution: _____

_____

_____

_____

Follow-up: _____

_____

_____

_____

Distribution: _____

_____

_____

_____

Analysis: _____

_____

_____

_____

Reporting: _____

_____

_____

_____

Detailed Checklist

Purpose of Meeting: _____

_____

_____

_____

Desired Outcomes: _____

_____

_____

_____

Notification:

☐ Press Release ☐ Display ☐ Flyers
☐ Newsletter ☐ Ad ☐ Other _____

Staff Roles: _____

_____

_____

_____

Room/Arrangements: _____

_____

_____

_____

☐ Keys ☐ Temperature ☐ Audio/Visual
☐ Outlets ☐ Restrooms ☐ Handicap Access
☐ Parking ☐ Babysitting ☐ Signs
☐ Phones ☐ Other _____

Questions:

- Will other events occur at the same time?
- Do you have a contingency plan in case of last minute changes?
- Who has final decision-making authority?