

Public Participation Guide: Public Meetings

Public meetings bring diverse groups of stakeholders together for a specific purpose. Public meetings are held to engage a wide audience in information sharing and discussion. They can be used to increase awareness of an issue or proposal, and can be a starting point for, or an ongoing means of engaging, further public involvement. When done well, they help build a feeling of community.

Meetings can be of virtually any size and can be used for any purpose from providing information up to consensus building. Public meetings are familiar, established ways for people to come together to express their opinions, hear a public speaker or proposed plan, engage in shared learning about a topic, or work together to develop solutions. Public meetings do not have to follow any specific script or agenda. They can be designed to meet the specific needs of the project, agency, and stakeholders. The main advantage of public meetings is the ability for stakeholders to listen to and talk to each other, not just the agency.

While most public meetings are larger and are intended to attract the full range of stakeholders in a community, smaller public meetings can also be held with like-minded stakeholders. Focus groups or dialogue meetings can be made up of people with common concerns who may not feel confident speaking up in a larger public gathering (e.g. women, those who speak English as a second language, indigenous groups). By creating a safe venue, these people can speak comfortably together, share common issues and a common purpose. The findings from smaller meetings can be presented at larger public meetings or in summary reports, giving a “voice” to those in the community who are unable to speak up in a larger setting.

Advantages

- Introduces a project or issue to a community.
- Provides all participants a chance to voice their concerns, issues, and ideas.
- Disseminates detailed information and decisions throughout the community.
- Provides opportunities for exploring alternative strategies and building consensus.
- Can create consensus for action on complex issues that require broad-based community input.

Challenges to Consider

- Unless carefully planned and well facilitated, those perceived as having the most power within the community, or those who are most articulate and domineering in their verbal style can dominate the meeting and overwhelm the ability of other voices to be heard.
- Even when well attended, meetings will only reach a very small segment of the community that require information and whose input could be extremely valuable in crafting solutions.
- Participants may not come from a broad enough range of interests to represent the entire community, providing a skewed view of what the public really thinks.
- Unless well designed and facilitated, conflicts may be deepened rather than explored and potentially resolved.
- Community members may not be willing to work together.

Principles for Successful Planning

- Establish why you need to hold a public meeting and design your meeting to meet these specific needs. Do not hold a meeting to simply meet a regulatory requirement; this wastes people's time and may create disinterest for future involvement.
- Consider a series of meetings, rather than a single event. If you try to do too much in a single meeting, you will achieve little as people will not be able to understand the full range of information you are trying to provide. Instead, consider the learning and deliberation journey required to solve the problem and identify strategic meeting points throughout the overall public participation process.
- Publicize and advertise the meeting broadly. Make sure to put information in places where stakeholders go for their community information. Reach out directly to the range of interests who should be in attendance and extend personal invitations.
- In all advertising, clearly state the goal of the meeting, how it will work, and why stakeholders should attend. State the beginning and end times but avoid providing information about smaller time segments.
- Public meetings are often a focal point for media interest. Invite media and provide them with specific information that will help them to cover the meeting accurately.
- Take photos to provide a record of the event.
- Videos of the presentations can be produced to stream on the web and provide a resource to those who could not attend.
- Produce a clear summary of the meeting and distribute widely.
- Book a venue that allows for flexibility as to numbers of attendees.
- Venue should be located directly in the affected community if possible, or in a neutral area if not.
- Provide refreshments.
- Conduct the meeting at a time that is most convenient for the community.

- Make arrangements for people with disabilities or with language interpretation needs.
- Arrive and set up early.
- Test all equipment and arrange seating to maximize interaction of participants.
- Greet everyone as they arrive and make them feel welcome.
- Ask participants to agree to ground rules or behavioral guidelines at the beginning of the meeting.
- Present the agenda and explain the purpose of the meeting, how it will work, expected outcomes, and how/where it fits into the overall public participation process.
- Facilitation is essential.
- Make sure to create a safe and secure environment for all voices to be heard and to avoid allowing the meeting to be taken over by vocal community members.
- Be flexible; issues may arise that can change the agenda or ability to address certain issues.
- Record all input and comments; summarize what you have heard at the end of the meeting and let participants know what you will do with their input and what to expect next in the process, especially opportunities for ongoing participation.

Resources Needed

Staffing

- Registration desk
- All staff should be up front to greet attendees and build or manage relationships
- Lead facilitators and breakout group facilitators
- Handlers for cordless microphones
- Recorders for flip charts or graphic recorders
- Note-takers
- A/V assistance, videographers
- Technical staff to give presentations
- Set up and break down of furniture and equipment
- Interpreters, if necessary

Materials

- Venue reservation with appropriate space and furniture
- Registration desk, forms, nametags
- Refreshments appropriate to time, effort and audience
- Data projectors, laptops, screens
- Flipcharts, tape, and markers
- Sound system with cordless microphones
- Presentations, posters, fact sheets, agendas
- Video
- Props for working in groups (pens, paper, pins, etc.)
- Evaluation forms, comment forms