# Beyond the Public Hearing—Tools for Better Public Engagement

## A Handbook for Municipal Elected Officials

## Wyoming Association of Municipalities 2010

# PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

We are a government "*of the people, by the people, and for the people.*" Ironically one area municipal officials often take too lightly is the public engagement process. When a community project turns into a public relations nightmare, decision-makers are left scratching their heads about what went wrong. How can you, as a municipal government official, engage citizens as partners in problem-solving and decision-making so that "your" project becomes the community's project? How can you move beyond the obligatory public hearing to truly engage the public in order to achieve public ownership and commitment to a project's ultimate success?

Effective public engagement is always important, but it also is becoming a legal requirement. For example, in March 2010, the Wyoming Business Council adopted new public participation requirements for community and economic development projects. In addition to the previously required legal public hearing, applicants are now required to "*inform and educate the public and business community to the greatest extent possible about the proposed economic development project utilizing a variety of techniques and media.*" A description of the applicant's public engagement process must be included with the grant/loan application.

So how does a community develop a public engagement process?

*With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions.*
*—Abraham Lincoln—*

# A Template for a Public Participation Plan

Mayors, council members and staff have a natural inclination to identify problems and fix them promptly. However, there can be a downside to acting too quickly. Conflicts can arise when solutions affect people who have different ideas, goals, needs, values or interests. Accordingly, long before implementing decisions, municipal officials should take steps to include in the planning process those who will be affected by the outcome of a project.

It is critical to build community support for a project by engaging citizens, businesses, property owners and other stakeholders. People with diverse attitudes and values need to have the opportunity to be involved. Without the input of its citizens, local government cannot have a true understanding of community values and needs. The process for reaching a decision in our community is often just as important as the decision itself. It must be the community's vision and in

order to know what that is, leaders must engage the community.

Understanding the background and "history" of an issue or project can lay the groundwork for establishing community trust. It also aids in defining how the issue is presented to the public so it is neutral and unbiased, and without alienating certain groups or individuals.

The most powerful public participation processes include empowerment of those members of the public who are invited, encouraged or recruited to assist in the project. Talking to constituents is not the same thing as empowering. It is also important to listen and hear. If decision-makers listen and consult and ignore what they hear – then the process is nothing but a fraud.

*One of the commonest ailments of the present day is premature formation of an opinion.*
*—Frank McKinney Hubbard—*

# Key elements for a successful participation plan

**1** **Results-Focused** – The public participation plan needs to develop and stick to a schedule. The end goal should always be kept front and center.

**2** **Offering information** – It is important that efforts be made to educate people about choices and implications of alternatives while building on an understanding of the project.

**3** **User-Friendly** – The information needs to be user-friendly. This means that it must be easy to understand and presented in a variety of ways to suit a diverse audience. No bureaucratic language! Diagrams, charts, and illustrations complement and clarify what is described in words. Different generations respond to different information venues – use them all!

**4** **Transparent** – The process needs to be open and accessible to the public so that people can safely express themselves. They need to see that their ideas receive serious consideration.

**5** **Engage People** – The process needs to be interactive, creative and fun with many opportunities for people to get involved. To keep people involved, give them a wide range of reasons to participate.

**6** **Find the Champions** – It is vital to identify the champions in the community who are trusted to carry the vision. This group includes those with influence, interest, intelligence or who are impacted in some way by the issue. These are people who have enough respect among the group that they are trusted and can act as catalysts for commitments to action.

*"There is one thing better than good government, that is government in which all the people have a part."*
*—Walter Hines Page—*

# Different Methods for Public Participation and Education

There are a number of tools project planners can use to help bring a project to completion in a community. It is important to *"get citizens together in the same room"* to create relationships – the most common failure in community engagement processes is citizens not talking to one another. Being in the same room doesn't necessarily mean physical location – it can be any form of coming together to discuss an issue. To keep people involved, give them a wide range of reasons to participate. Citizens are most willing to join in when there is food, entertainment or opportunities for networking and socializing.

*Method:* **Project website and on-line polls**

One way to engage the public from the beginning is to develop a project website with links to other relevant websites (city or town, chamber of commerce, economic development agency, etc.)  This will allow people the opportunity to track the project's progress as it unfolds. The website can be expanded to include on-line polls and blogs or other comment avenues. Social network sites such as Facebook, Youtube and Twitter should also be considered to facilitate dialogue.

*Method:* **Public Information Materials**

Public information materials provide updates about a project that is underway or in the planning stages.  A sample range of public information materials might include:

- Billboards
- Flyers
- Display boards
- Electronic media
- Brochures
- News articles

- Radio and television spots *(paid and public service announcements)*
- Regularly updated mailing lists
- Newsletters
- Newspaper ads, inserts and articles
- Website
- Posters
- Press releases
- Progress bulletins
- Videotapes
- Utility bill or bank statement inserts

## *Method:* **Community Workshops/ Open Houses**

Community workshops or open houses are an important part of a project's success. These allow the public to come together to share their thoughts, ideas and concerns about a project and to provide new information to strengthen the project. These sessions should not be a "lecture" format, but rather hands-on interactive exercises that are meaningful, fun and productive.

Electronic key pad polling, paper pads and markers and computer simulations are all ways to effectively engage the public at a community workshop. The goal should be to achieve broad participation, establish common ground and create an atmosphere conducive to the exchange of ideas.

## *Method:* **Community Events and Civic Organizations**

When possible, a project's information pieces (flyers, brochures, etc.), can be piggy-backed onto local events that draw people, such as county fairs and community celebrations. Local leaders should schedule presentations at various civic or faith-based organizations as well. The face-to-face communication offered through public speaking opportunities provides a great opportunity to inform citizens and encourage their involvement. Since this can be time consuming, it is sometimes necessary to prioritize opportunities in order to maximize effectiveness.

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*Method:* **Surveys**

Surveys can be done in a number of ways to measure attitudes, opinions and values. Surveys can be written, telephone, key-pad polling, or personal interview.

Key person interviews are one-on-one talks about a specific topic or issue with an opinion leader, spokesperson for a particular interest group or representative of the local media. They can be very helpful in understanding the perspective of citizens.

*Method:* **Community Advisory Committee**

A community advisory committee is a representative group of diverse stakeholders that meets regularly to discuss broad issues of common concern. A community advisory committee will typically include representation from a variety of interest groups throughout the community. It will have regularly scheduled meetings on a number

of topics centered around a subject matter or project and will be charged with making recommendations to the official decision-makers. Care should be taken to avoid selecting only like-minded individuals. These committees do better when ALL points of view can be fairly represented by advocates who aren't afraid of speaking up!

*Method:* **Focus Group or Task Force**

A focus group is a quick way to generate ideas and get reactions on a specific proposal or problem. Six to ten people who may have something in common but who may not know each other are invited to attend a session. They will be assigned one specific task with a time limit for resolution or conclusions. There can be follow-up sessions if necessary. Because it is important to maintain a balance of participants, there is no "open" invitation extended to the general public.

A neutral facilitator should be used to create an honest, non-biased, productive discussion. The municipality or other "host" organization can be present but should
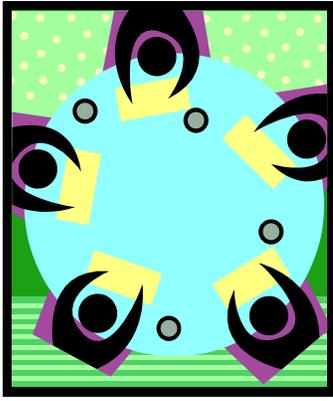
not speak in defense of the project or provide opinions.

A focus group should be used when the goal is to identify likes, dislikes and perceptions about a specific proposal, and when it is desirable to reach a lot of different groups and compare their thoughts and ideas. This process allows project planners to reach underrepresented groups who might not typically attend public meetings. It is a relatively efficient way to get feedback about a specific project.

This method helps decision-makers understand the values of participants and their reactions to various proposals or alternatives. It can help in the development of policies, programs, services, distribution of resources and resolution of stalemates through a participative process.

*Method:* **Action Forum**

An action forum brings people from all walks of life into the same conversation. Thus, it is important to have a cross-section of the community involved. Action forums are very task-focused. They may involve 60-80 people. The large group is divided into small groups of 8-10 individuals. The small groups discuss the issues and then summarize their conclusions for the larger group. Task forces may then be created on action items identified. Official decision-makers are given the opportunity to add to conclusions reached in the small groups.

Action forums allows participants to socialize and network which can lead to the changing of minds, a finding of common ground and acting in ways that go beyond their own self-interest. Participants develop empathy through learning, sharing personal experiences, understanding different views and building trust.

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*Of course I'm a publicity hound. Aren't all crusaders?*
*How can you accomplish anything*
*unless people know what you're trying to do?*
*—Vivien Kellems—*

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# DEALING WITH CONFLICT

Always invite those with different viewpoints to be involved. If they agree to participate, they can help find middle ground. If they don't wish to participate, the invitations can still open communications and build trust. The courtesy extended to them to be involved may defuse their opposition to a project.

We unwittingly energize the negative forces in our communities if we attempt to stifle opposition. When conflicts exist it is important to acknowledge them in a respectful way. When the community is divided on an issue, seek to understand the reasons. Enlist everyone's help in generating options to consider. Face-to-face dialogue often leads to increased empathy.

Think of how, and where, you can find community members who will become the champions of the project.

# SUMMARY

There are many good ways to engage our communities. On any issue we need to ask several questions:

- What is our description of the project and who are the stakeholders?

- What are the competing needs?

- What are all of the interrelated elements?

- What will be the total cost—both initial and ongoing?

- What are our goals in engaging the public?
    Education?
    Fact-finding?
    Identifying alternatives?
    Obtaining buy-in?

- What do we need to learn from the public?

- What do we agree on and what are the public values that are in conflict?

- What does the public need to know in order to participate effectively?

- How might we use engagement tools to achieve our goals?

In any public participation process, decision-makers should remember that they need to spend a great deal more time on consensus-building, educating and informing the public and not worry so much about arbitrary time limits – democracy takes time.

Many of the issues that have caused conflict in communities could probably have been better handled by empowering the stakeholders to help the community and using the vast array of community resources to achieve ownership of the project.

Our "community life" impulses are naturally very broad– people like to socialize, eat, listen to music, build things, network, solve problems, etc. Rather than dragging people away from *"community life"* to take part in the political process, community leaders should establish public participation processes within the framework of the existing community life.

Leaders who create a tradition of effective public engagement provide a great service to their communities. The true potential of *"government by the people"* becomes a reality. Their home towns become the places that are prepared for the future—ready to meet challenges and take full advantage of opportunities.
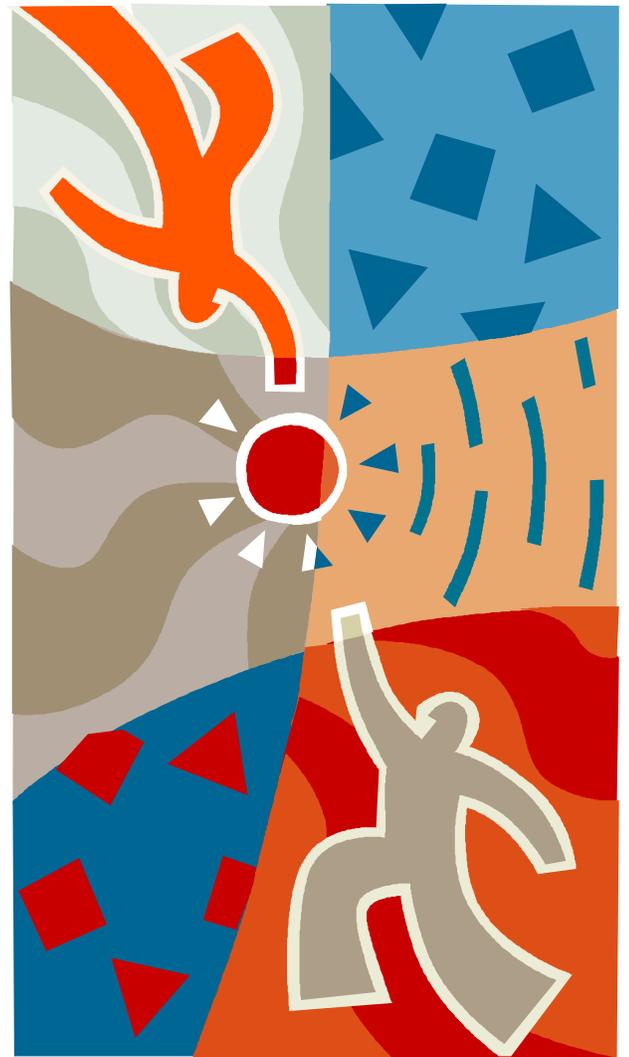
*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens
can change the world.
Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."*
*—Margaret Mead—*