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Citizen Engagement & Conflict Resolution

Citizen participation in community decision making is one of the pillars upon which the U.S. was founded and is at the heart of the planning process. Because the way in which we use our land—a finite resource—affects every member of a community, it is essential that citizens help shape land-use decisions.

One of the main responsibilities of the planning commission is engaging the public in the planning process. By using new technologies and innovative approaches, planning commissions have been able to involve many community groups in the development of a community vision or plan.

Meetings with stakeholders begin the process of public participation. From issue identification to the evaluation of options and designs, meetings can be used at various stages of the planning process. The commission's objective—the exchange of information, problem solving, the creation of a community vision—will determine the forum, format, participants, and location of the meeting.

Commissioners need to decide how to involve the public in the planning process. A well developed public participation program not only informs and involves stakeholders, it develops the community's

capacity for problem solving and creates new partnerships and new processes for decision making. In putting together a participation process, planning commissioners and their staff should consider:

- Who are the key stakeholders and how should they be involved?
- What information does the commission need from the community and how will it be obtained?
- How will citizen participation be structured and financed?
- How much time should be allotted for the public process?

Securing public participation requires effort on a variety of fronts. People acquire information from a multitude of sources and each is a viable option for spreading the word. For various reasons—child care issues, scheduling conflicts, job commitments—some members of the

community will not be able to participate in meetings or events. There are ways to solicit ideas and opinion from the greater community.

- **Go where the people are.** Be actively involved in community life and invite people to share comments about the community or planning proposals.
- **Go online.** Post information on the municipality's web page and provide an opportunity for feedback.
- **Go to the press.** Cultivate a relationship with the local newspaper and help the editor see planning in the community as a newsworthy event.
- **Hit the airwaves.** Partner with a local television or radio station to hold an electronic town meeting or call-in show.
- **Go to school.** Involve local youth and, often by extension, their parents.
- **Go to the post office.** Direct mail remains a potent way of getting information, surveys, or questionnaires into the hands of residents.
- **Go door to door.** Ask local homeowners or citizens associations to canvass the neighborhood.

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In communities where there are non-English speaking residents, consider outreach efforts in other languages. Also consider other avenues for reaching these individuals. In cultures where churches play a significant role, invitations can be sent to pastors and congregants. Community-oriented policing programs offer another opportunity. Neighborhood officers often have established relationships with community leaders and can emphasize the benefits of participation.

Two of the more popular forums for garnering citizen input are visioning and charrettes. A charrette is an intense session during which teams concentrate on a planning issue and pose solutions. It is an active, hands-on process that is led by a facilitator whose job is to encourage contributions from all participants. Participation often is solicited to ensure that charrette members cut across a community's social, economic, and political divides. Its time limit challenges participants to examine problems in a rapid, open, and honest manner. A charrette often occurs early in the planning process to provide useful ideas and perspectives and to unearth and resolve conflicts. After identifying and defining the issue before them, participants break into small groups for facilitated discussions and goal setting. Toward the end of the event, discussion centers on implementation priorities. Following the charrette, the facilitator summarizes the consensus points. This summary becomes the basis for a plan that can identify changes

in zoning or capital improvements that are needed to achieve the desired results.

Visioning consists of a series of meetings that focus on long-range objectives and ask citizens to imagine their community 20 or more years down the road. Visioning is inclusive, incorporating opinions from all stakeholders. Because visioning looks for common ground among participants and ideas, impartial leadership is key to its success. In order for these groups to do their jobs, information and data are necessary, including census and other demographic information. The result of visioning most often is a document summarizing the vision, which is then adopted or endorsed by the local governing body. The challenge is to move from broad vision to tangible results. Some communities incorporate action planning or benchmarking into their visioning. This provides a level both of accountability and control over a community's destiny.

Soliciting opinions from community members, especially when done face to face, opens the door to conflict that must be addressed. Listening closely to what participants have to say and treating them with dignity is key to resolving conflict. People want their ideas and opinions to be considered, even if they are not ultimately adopted. When rendering a decision, it is helpful for planning commissioners to provide verbal or written references that make it clear that all sides were heard.

During public meetings, commissioners should monitor their nonverbal and verbal communication. Slouching in a chair or burying one's nose in written documents signal a lack of interest in what is being said. Forcefully stating opinions or using sarcasm may discourage further discussion and alienate participants.

In some cases, conflict can be resolved without commission involvement in advance of a public hearing. In many jurisdictions, applicants are encouraged or required to meet with members of the community to present their proposal and listen to concerns. In some cases, developers may modify their plans to mollify community objections. In at least one state, Virginia, these agreed-upon modifications—called proffers—are legally binding.

Despite the best of intentions, there are times when a disgruntled individual can disrupt a meeting. It is in everyone's best interest for commissioners to remain calm, cordial, and polite. Stick to the agenda and timeline. The hearing process should have specific amounts of time allotted to individuals and groups and it is unfair to allow extra time to any point of view. If necessary, call a brief break and offer to meet with a dissenter later on. Meetings can be adjourned, but such a drastic step should be the last option considered.

Planning is a process that ultimately benefits from community involvement, despite the potential for conflict. By building grassroots support for planning efforts, the potential for implementation increases and, as a result, a community comes closer to achieving its vision. ■■

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