

C. Participation and Communication

Participation in consensus-building and collaborative decision-making processes should be thought of as a dialogue between the process and interested parties. Effective participation involves both getting information out to citizens and interest groups and getting back their ideas, issues, and concerns.

The following sections provide a number of ways to get information TO the public and solicit information FROM the public. The techniques are designed to either involve the public directly in the process or ensure that they remain aware of its progress. James L. Creighton's *Involving Citizens in Community Decision-Making: A Guidebook* (Washington, D.C.: Program for Community Problem Solving, 1992) offers a comprehensive and detailed review of methods to involve citizens in a wide variety of public decision-making processes. Much of the material that follows is drawn from this source.

1. Public Involvement

Individuals and groups are motivated to participate in community activities in response to some interest with which they identify. They may hope to protect a private or public resource, advance an institutional agenda, or balance or block the influence of another, or they may simply be curious. Based on differences in roles, technical expertise, and willingness and ability to commit time and energy to a process, individuals will participate at very different levels. One way to picture this is illustrated in figure 9.

Figure 9

Participation by Community Groups in the Decision-Making Process



The center position is occupied by the major stakeholders and formal decision makers. At the next level of influence are the spokespersons for various interest groups, who may have their own staff or technical consultants and are willing to spend time and energy to influence the decision-making process. Other interested individuals and groups occupy the next ring from the center. The outcome may affect their interests peripherally, or they may not have the time or resources to participate as fully as those represented in the second ring. Good government and watchdog groups may also be included in this ring. The outer rings typically include individuals either who are not very interested in participation or who might like to influence the process but cannot afford the time or energy.

As one moves closer to the center, the opportunities to influence decisions are greater, but these positions require an increasingly greater commitment of resources. The central positions are the easiest to identify, and these are the easiest groups and individuals to engage in the process. At the outer end of the spectrum is the general public—the toughest group to draw into the process. Extending opportunities for participation to the outer rings requires increased time and energies of the project sponsor or process manager.

Different sorts of techniques are required to engage or inform the members of the various rings. Figure 10 offers some guidelines for the levels of involvement that should be designed into processes with different characteristics.

The level of public involvement in a process is also closely related to the extent and nature of a perceived threat to an individual's or group's interests. For example, suppose a city has identified a site to condemn for a park. As a parent, you might be in favor of supporting a small increase in taxes to provide more places for your children to play and would want the park located nearby. If you lived on a block adjacent to a proposed site, you may be

Figure 10
Guidelines for Level of Involvement

Characteristics of	Low Involvement	High Involvement
Stakeholders	Clear representation Unified groups	Many unrepresented interests Divided groups
Issues	Little public concern	Significant public concern
Political Symbolism	No salient symbols	Highly visible, sensitive symbols
Decision Climate	Exclusive negotiation	Inclusive negotiation environment

motivated to lobby for certain facilities or to limit the park's use to certain times of the day. As a resident, you perceive the park at once as a threat and a benefit. If you viewed the proposal through the eyes of a local business owner, you may expect the park to bring more shoppers past your storefront. With this economic interest in mind, you could form a coalition of neighborhood businesses to support the project. If your property was targeted for condemnation for the park, you might feel directly threatened and work to block the project completely.

As this scenario suggests, people become engaged in public matters to differing degrees, depending in part on the level of perceived threats or benefits to their economic, institutional, and personal interests. If the perceived threat or benefit is strong enough, an individual will try to influence the decision-making process, attempting to move from the outer rings in figure 9 toward the center. An analysis of the parties during the situation assessment stage should reveal these interests and perceptions and provide a basis for the design of an appropriate participation process.

2. Participation Techniques

There are many ways to involve interested parties in a consensus-building process. Several common techniques to involve citizens in a process and solicit feedback are introduced in this section, but the lists are by no means exhaustive. Unique circumstances will force you to pick and choose among these options, combine techniques, and in some situations, create new forums and communication strategies tailored to the needs of your community or situation.

Citizen Participation Techniques

- Charettes ✓
- Focus Groups ✓
- Interviews
- Public Hearings, Community Meetings, Workshops
- Electronic Town Meetings ✓
- Hot Lines
- Polls and Surveys
- Team-Building Activities
- Written Comments

a. Charettes

A charette is a useful tool to bring together interested parties to work through community planning and design problems. The charette process is used to generate urban design schemes, physical improvement plans, and site-specific design proposals in an open, public context. The charette process can be used to focus discussions on the architectural or urban design implications of a controversial proposal. Through drawings and models, participants can test how certain alternatives or ideas affect the physical context. Site plans, building designs, streetscape improvements, and park plans may be developed or refined

through the charette process. (See the Brea charette case in this manual for an example of a successful use of this technique.)

A successful charette requires a good deal of preplanning and the participation of people with significant design and graphic presentation skill. Because of the time it takes to produce illustrations of different alternatives, a charette can take several days to complete. Substantial support is required to ensure success. Someone has to pay for the drawing material, space rental, refreshments, and lodging, if necessary. And because of the time commitment, it may be difficult to get key decision makers to participate.

The Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council in Florida has conducted smaller-scale charettes for a half-dozen small- and medium-sized cities along Florida's east coast. The council's charette process begins with a series of public meetings to identify community concerns and define a problem-solving agenda. If it is agreed that the charette approach is best, one is scheduled and the requisite preparations are made. A charette may run for several days, but a predetermined schedule of presentations and public work sessions allows parties and stakeholders to participate. Upon the completion of the charette, the work is cleaned up and prepared for presentation to local officials.

b. Electronic Town Meetings

An increasing number of communities broadcast important meetings, such as city council meetings, over local television channels. Several have experimented with more participatory uses of television.

To kick off the Savannah/Chateau Vision 20/20 process, an electronic town meeting was held, which engaged 400 citizens in 24 concurrent workshops in different neighborhoods throughout the area. During the one-night event, a prime-time television program introducing the process was held, and viewers were invited to call in and share their concerns and aspirations for the future of the region. At least 90,000 of the area's 217,000 residents watched the proceedings on television.⁸

Of course, this is an expensive approach, and it requires a great deal of expertise in communication technology and meeting management. But for long-term, strategic visioning processes, it may be the most effective way to generate interest in the process and solicit the concerns of those traditionally reluctant to participate.

c. Focus Groups

Focus groups have been used by market research experts for decades to assess consumer reaction to particular products, services, or messages. More recently, this technique has been used to gain an understanding of public opinion. In a focus group, a small number of people are brought together in a confidential setting to discuss an issue with the assistance of a skilled facilitator.

The facilitator usually establishes the tone of the meeting and initiates the conversation. To encourage open discussion, the facilitator poses open-ended questions to the group or asks for feedback on a number of topics. To test the

group's reaction to particular proposals or ideas, the facilitator may introduce new information or alternatives into the discussion.

Conversation is encouraged between members of the focus group rather than with the facilitator. A video or audio recording may be made of the proceedings, so the content of conversation can be analyzed to assess how people frame the issues, whether any words stimulate a strong reaction, whether any solutions emerge, and the strength of interest in the issues or any particular outcome.

d. Hot Lines

Telephone hot lines can be used when a large number of people seek to offer their input on a particular subject. They are especially appropriate when the stakeholder community is geographically dispersed. A hot line, in this context, is a widely advertised phone number that puts interested parties in direct contact with someone who may collect public opinion or answer questions on a specific process or topic. Rather than leaving people to call a general information number and try to track down the appropriate contact, providing a hot line gives interested parties direct access to information.

(FH. Land)

Touch-tone telephone technology allows callers to either speak directly with a person or choose between a series of prerecorded messages. Callers can engage in a conversation or simply call in to leave a message or receive information on meeting dates and topics. Systems that are designed to allow callers to reach a person should be actively staffed and widely publicized.

e. Interviews

People will often provide much more information in conversation than in public forums. For this reason, interviews offer a good way to gather detailed information on specific issues. Interviews can be used as a quick way to learn how citizens view a particular problem or how they might be engaged in a public-involvement process, or to evaluate the effectiveness of an ongoing process.

(FH. Land)

Information gathered from the interviews is often kept confidential or is distributed without attribution. Since interviews are usually limited to a small number of people, they may not be representative of the broad public. A drawback of the interview format springs from the type of communication—the nature of the interviewing process does not allow conversation between adversaries and may encourage people to harden their positions.

Depending on your resources, interviews may be conducted by a consultant or by staff trained in the techniques of effective interviewing.

f. Polls and Surveys

Polls and surveys, like interviews, can be used to quickly gauge public sentiment and to identify the concerns and interests of the general public. Opinion polls can be expensive but may help establish general areas of public concern and the relative importance of certain issues. To be developed, administered,

and evaluated properly, polls and surveys should be conducted by individuals with significant expertise in survey design and interpretation.

Polls and surveys should be used with caution. Many people view them as impersonal, and others may be wary of published findings. Too often, survey techniques are used as a way to sell a product or idea. If a pollster or sponsor fails to maintain strict objectivity in the interpretation of results, the public may ignore otherwise useful findings.

g. Public Hearings, Community Meetings, and Workshops

Public meetings of some kind, whether town meetings, public hearings, or workshops, are by far the most widely used public-participation techniques.

Public hearings. Public hearings are rather formal meetings at which people present official statements of positions and assertions of fact. Such meetings do a good job of meeting legal requirements for the preparation of a formal record, but they do a particularly poor job of bringing people together to solve difficult problems.

In fact, as mentioned in chapter III of this manual, public hearings tend to exaggerate differences between parties in a dispute. Speakers are inclined to express more rigid and extreme positions than they might in less-formal circumstances. The conventional hearing process has also been criticized as offering only a token opportunity for citizens to influence public decision makers; the public is invited to respond to an alternative but is excluded from the real problem-solving effort. If it is legally necessary to hold a series of formal hearings at the end of a decision-making process, these hearings should follow the use of more-inclusive, less-formal, and interactive-participation techniques.

✓ **Community meetings and workshops.** Unlike public hearings, community meetings may take many forms, depending on their purpose. The community meeting format offers a way to bring citizens together with public agency staff to satisfy one or more of the following goals:

- Educate the public.
- Seek input from the public.
- Seek a reaction from the public.
- Make decisions.

Because the format and purpose of these meetings may vary widely, it is essential to clearly communicate expectations. Some people may expect a public hearing model, while others may come prepared to brainstorm solutions to a problem. Typically, a community meeting will fall somewhere between these two extremes, offering some level of interaction or two-way communication between citizens and officials.

Specific, task-focused meetings may be used to bring together a working group to tackle an issue. Called workshops, these meetings differ somewhat from other kinds of community meetings: they are often convened with the stated purpose of completing a specific assignment. For example, a workshop may be designed to get agreement on criteria for the siting of a public facility or to produce a set of standards for the review of a development proposal.

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Workshops are especially useful when the task involves some level of physical planning—siting, design, circulation, and so forth.

Workshops are often targeted at leaders of organized groups or interests, not so much at “the person on the street.” To reduce the danger that a group is not representative, the participants in workshops must—even if they represent a leadership group—represent the full spectrum of interests in a community. It doesn’t work to try to reach agreement if not all key viewpoints are represented in the discussion.

Large community meetings or workshops, or ones that aren’t likely to generate controversy, may require assistance from a skilled facilitator. Large community meetings are commonly broken into smaller groups in order to increase the amount of “air time” available to each person.

h. Team-Building Activities

While most citizen-involvement activities are clearly designed to focus the attention of the public on a particular substantive task, occasionally, fixed-membership groups will need to clarify and strengthen their relationships through team-building exercises. Outdoor courses and retreats are often used as the first step toward restructuring and improving relationships. Participants are removed from their standard working context and engaged in activities to promote open communication. Team-building exercises are generally led by a person who specializes in these events.

i. Written Comments

Used more at the federal level than elsewhere in government, requests for written comment are a familiar and precise way of getting detailed comments on complex and technical proposals. Where resources are limited and wide community participation is not necessary, it may be the least expensive form of public involvement.

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3. Communication Strategies

Members of the public need to know what is going on to be able to decide if they want to participate in a process. People need information about alternatives before they can make choices among them, and they need to know the facts and values that shape a decision before deciding whether or not to support it.

When designing strategies to keep the public informed, it is useful to consider the “public” as at least three distinct entities: (1) the media, (2) the primary stakeholders and formal decision makers, and (3) the secondary stake-

“Every good public participation program includes a good public information program.”

James L. Creighton, *Involving Citizens in Community Decision-Making: A Guidebook* (Washington, D.C.: Program for Community Problem Solving, 1992).

holders and general public. Each group requires its own sort of information and level of involvement.

The following sections offer advice on how to work most effectively with the media and communicate information and ideas to stakeholders, decision makers, and the general public.

a. Working with the Media

The media play a complex role in local planning and growth-management disputes. In private disputes, information can be shielded behind closed doors and court orders. But in public disputes, members of the press have a responsibility to inform the public about public matters. Most media representatives serve as objective reporters as well as stakeholders concerned about the future of their community. They pose as neutral observers, while simultaneously filtering and amplifying information and offering critiques of the proceedings and outcomes.

Media relations can be frustrating, but if the following items are addressed during the process design stage, a relatively stable relationship should develop:

- The media should be treated with respect and included in the earliest stages of the process. The media can be an extremely helpful partner in a collaborative process. Valuable information is transmitted to the public through television, newspapers, magazines, and radio, so it is critical to maintain open lines of communication.

- A conflict-resolution group should decide early in its work how it wants to deal with the media. A single spokesperson? A committee to oversee media contact? Communication with the media should be honest, however circumscribed.

- Often, the media are most cooperative when they are invited to participate in collaborative problem-solving processes as observers. On the flip side, the media are often least cooperative when they believe that secret processes are being held to escape public scrutiny or devise private deals.

- The press tends to find that conflict resolution makes for a much less interesting story than conflict. When they come to meetings and see that progress is being made, they are often happy to stay away and take your word for what's going on.

b. Communicating with Stakeholders, Decision Makers, and the General Public

Briefings. Briefings are an effective way to keep elected officials, agencies, or key interest groups informed. Briefings are generally informal meetings or phone calls, intended to provide progress reports on the status of a consensus-building or decision-making process. In an informal manner, information regarding agenda changes or decision making can be relayed to those in positions of authority or with a stake in the outcome.

It is especially important to keep political officeholders informed. "The first law of governmental affairs is never to let an elected official (or agency head) be taken by surprise."⁹ If the actions of a group are likely to stir up political controversy, elected officials need to know what is going on. If they are caught

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Communication Strategies

- Briefings
- News Stories and PSAs
- Newspaper Inserts and Paid Advertisements
- Press Kits
- Exhibits and Displays
- Newsletters
- Presentations

off guard by a question from a constituent or the press because you have failed to keep in close contact, their support for the process may falter.

Exhibits and displays. One way to keep the public informed and stimulate greater participation is to set up an exhibit or display in a public place, such as a shopping mall, courthouse, school, or at major community events like a county fair. Such displays, depending on the content and material, may be expensive, but they can be designed for use in different circumstances and locations. Exhibits and displays are more effective if they are staffed by a knowledgeable person to answer questions.

News stories and public service announcements. Feature stories and public service announcements are the two primary ways the media will report on a process. The feature story is a full-blown news piece written by a reporter or newscaster. A public service announcement, often called a “PSA,” is a brief notice of a public meeting, event, or activity. Neither one requires a direct expense, and as a general practice, newspapers, radio stations, and television stations will provide brief announcements, so long as you give them adequate notice and complete information.

To have a feature story written is another matter altogether. Sending a news release may lead to a PSA, but it won't necessarily get the media interested in doing a feature. You may have more luck making a personal contact with an editor or reporter. A news conference may stimulate the interest of the media. But you need to be sure the topic is particularly interesting and the person holding the conference is a well-known, respected member of the community. Otherwise, the announcement may be viewed as simply a publicity stunt and disregarded.

Of course, if the issue you're dealing with becomes controversial, the problem isn't getting the media interested, but making sure that the information it receives is timely, factual, and objective.

✓ **Newsletters.** To sustain interest throughout a long process, the publication and distribution of a newsletter may be worthwhile. Typically, newsletters are sent to individuals, interest groups, public officials, and others interested in an issue. On noncontroversial issues, the mailing list may be fairly small, but when a hot topic is under consideration, mailing lists can grow into the thousands. In fact, Loudoun County, Virginia, decided to send the first copy of its Zoning Ordinance Working Group newsletter to all property owners in the county. The working group was beginning a comprehensive review of the

county's zoning ordinance and decided to use the newsletter as a way to reach all affected parties.

The obvious advantage in starting a newsletter is that you have control over its content. It is important that the information be presented in an objective, easy-to-read manner, though. Newsletters should not be used as a promotional device for a predetermined position. In highly polarized situations, it may be in your best interest to have an advisory committee review articles. Or you may need to identify an acceptable third party to produce it. Whatever you do, the newsletter should not be viewed as a form of paid advertising.

Newspaper inserts and paid advertisements. One way to reach an entire community with the same information is to prepare a newspaper insert or pay for an advertisement in the local media. Local papers often provide free or discounted space to local governments for the sake of educating the public about an issue, policy, or program. Be prepared though: the more people who know about the process, the more likely it is that the number of people who want to participate will increase.

Presentations. An effective way to communicate with influential or hard-to-reach segments of the population is to arrange presentations to civic or religious groups, business associations, environmental groups, and neighborhood associations. If you expect to make a series of presentations, it will be helpful to prepare a slide show, a series of maps or charts, or other visual material. Visual material helps hold the interest of an audience and presents more information in a short amount of time.

You need to remember to tailor your message to meet the special needs of the groups you are trying to reach and provide a mechanism to receive questions and comments after the presentation is over.

Press kits. To make it easier for members of the press corps to cover your work, it may be helpful to put together a press kit. Press kits typically consist of a folder with pockets containing short summaries of a project's need, the decision-making process, summaries of key technical material, and short biographies of participants. Remember that reporters work under strict deadlines, so material should be brief and concise.

Notes

1. Ronald L. Thomas, Mary C. Means, and Margaret A. Grieve, *Taking Charge: How Communities Are Planning Their Futures* (Washington, D.C.: International City Management Association, 1988), 32.
2. See the Brea and Baltimore cases in this manual for examples of effective community visioning.
3. William R. Potapchuk, "New Approaches to Citizen Participation: Building Consent," *National Civic Review* (Spring 1991): 167.
4. William R. Potapchuk, James H. Laue, and John S. Murray, *Getting to the Table: A Guide for Senior Managers*, IWR Pamphlet 89-ADR-P-2 (Fort Belvoir, Va.: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Institute for Water Resources, 1990), 23.
5. William R. Potapchuk and Chris Carlson, "Using Conflict Analysis to Determine Intervention Techniques," *Mediation Quarterly* 16 (Summer 1987): 31.

6. Robert Jones, "Building Consensus in Growing Communities: Mediated Approaches to Growth Management Conflicts," presented at ULI Policy Forum on Consensus Building for Growth Management, Washington, D.C., December 1990.
7. Potapchuk, "New Approaches to Citizen Participation," 167.
8. *Community Problem Solving Case Summaries: Volume III* (Washington, D.C.: Program for Community Problem Solving, 1992), 23.
9. James L. Creighton, *Involving Citizens in Community Decision-Making: A Guidebook* (Washington, D.C.: Program for Community Problem Solving, 1992), 123.