Developing Effective Citizen Engagement:

A How-To Guide for Community Leaders

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Citizen Engagement in the 21st Century

At the heart of this guide is the belief that local governments, community organizations and public agencies make better decisions and have greater positive impact on their communities when they increase the frequency, diversity, and level of engagement of community residents.

Significant gaps and barriers exist to effective citizen engagement. In many rural communities across Pennsylvania (and the nation), most citizens do not participate in the decisions that affect their daily lives, and there is often a lack of trust between citizens and local officials. A crucial bridge over this gap is the use of appropriate strategies and tools to encourage citizens and local officials to interact regularly, increase their knowledge of each other, and develop trust.

This guide:
• describes processes for meaningful citizen engagement;
• offers recommendations for inviting participation from a broad cross-section of the community;
• provides guidelines for communicating and developing trust between community leaders and citizens; and
• describes ways to create an environment that encourages consistent and long-term engagement in community affairs.

This guide will assist many organizations as they engage citizens and stakeholders in local decision-making and other community projects. Potential users of this guide include local elected and appointed officials; leaders of community civic organizations and nonprofit groups; and public service agency representatives.

This guide is organized around eight steps of a formal citizen engagement plan:
1. Define the Issue
2. Identify the Purpose and Degree of Citizen Engagement
3. Identify Tools for Engaging Citizens
4. Identify Community Groups That Need To Be Involved
5. Develop a Plan for Recruiting and Retaining Participants
6. Create a Positive Environment for Citizen Engagement
7. Identify Evaluation Criteria and Decide on Next Steps
8. Maintain Open Lines of Communication

These steps offer a structure for a formal plan. Your organization's efforts may not need a formal plan, however. In this case, the guide can provide an introduction to tools and techniques your organization could use to improve participation in community efforts already underway.

This guide brings together existing resources and research regarding best practices for citizen participation, as well as information from interviews with 20 community and organizational leaders from across Pennsylvania.

While the text summarizes this information, this guide is not intended to be a complete review. Instead, it is intended to get you started in improving citizen participation in your community. This guide is a starting point; there is a list of resources at the end should you want to pursue these topics in more detail.

What is Citizen Engagement and Why Pursue It?

To put it simply, citizens of a community are "engaged" when they play an effective role in decision-making. That means they are actively involved in defining the issues, identifying solutions, and developing priorities for action and resources. Local leaders need to broaden their list of responsibilities to include roles as facilitator, supporter, collaborator, and empowerer of local community members. This change requires letting go of some of the traditional reins of power and trusting that citizens can and will effectively engage in the issues. The result is a partnership that is nearly always healthy for a community.

Citizen engagement involves five elements:
1. Increasing citizens' knowledge about a community issue.
2. Encouraging citizens to apply that knowledge.
3. Using that knowledge to improve the community.
4. Creating opportunities for citizens to engage *each other.*
5. Ensuring that these opportunities are regular and on-going.

Why Engage Citizens in Community Affairs?

A process that engages citizens can:
• *Increase the likelihood that projects or solutions will be widely accepted.* Citizens who participate in these processes show significant commitment to help make the projects happen.
• *Create more effective solutions.* Drawing on local knowledge from a diverse group creates solutions that are practical and effective.
• *Improve citizens' knowledge and skills in problem solving.* Participants learn about the issues in-depth. Greater knowledge allows them to see multiple sides of the problem. Citizens can practice communication and decision-making skills.
• *Empower and integrate people from different backgrounds.* Groups that feel ignored can gain greater control over their lives and their community. When people from different areas of the community work together, they often find that they have much in common.
• *Create local networks of community members.* The more people who know what is going on and who are willing to work toward a goal, the more likely a community is to be successful in reaching its goals.
• *Create several opportunities for discussing concerns.* Regular, on-going discussions allow people to express concerns before problems become too big or out of control.
• *Increase trust in community organizations and local governance.* Working together improves communication and understanding. Knowing what local government and community leaders can and cannot do may reduce future conflict.
Being involved shows citizens they can make positive changes in their communities – and also that the process of change can be frustrating and slow, and limited by laws and administrative rules.

What Are the Basic Principles To Follow?

Success is not automatic. Making it happen involves a long-term commitment to developing skills and a willingness to fail before succeeding. It also means occasionally reaching out into the community and even stirring things up a little. It requires a firm belief that all

the work and change will result in a better outcome in the long run.

Getting effective participation depends on the tools and techniques you choose and how they are used and promoted. While the rest of this publication describes these tools, we want to first highlight a few aspects of successful citizen engagement.

• *Inclusivity*: Past experiences, lack of knowledge, and cultural context can limit involvement by some groups. You need to reach out into sections of the community that have not participated in the past and which might not at first seem to be fertile ground for recruitment.
• *Diversity*: All members of the community need to participate to represent different viewpoints and interests. Viewpoints that at first seem unconventional sometimes turn out to hold the seed of a solution.
• *Equality*: Everyone participates on an equal basis. It should be clear that decisions are not controlled by a small group. Leaders need to ensure that open discussion occurs and all ideas are treated with respect.
• *Transparency*: The work of the community group needs to be open. Important roles cannot all be reserved for those in charge. Public communication about the project needs to be clear and consistent.
• *Legitimacy*: Decisions made by the group need to be justified to all. Describe how all participants had input into the final decision.
• *Deliberation:* Create an environment that encourages people to share but also allows the group to prioritize some ideas. The process should lead to consensus.
• *Substance*: Create opportunities for learning and using that knowledge in group discussions.
• *Influence*: The outcome of the process needs to influence community decisions and policy-making. Local decision-makers should show their support early in the project. Leaders need to engage citizens as early as possible and support their continued involvement.
• *On-going*: The process should consist of more than one meeting and allow participants time to think about the issue before making decisions.
• *Accommodating*: Provide opportunities for people to gather in multiple places and at multiple times that are convenient for them. Remember that not everyone who wants to contribute can make meetings at night, during the daytime, or in only one part of the community.

DEVELOPING A CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT PLAN

Citizen participation is a tool to help your community make better decisions. It can be applied to many issues. Perhaps there's a need to resolve a relatively small problem – say, building a softball field in a neighborhood park. A plan to engage neighbors, potential users, and township parks and recreation officials early in the process might involve a small task force to discuss the issue and make a recommendation to the municipality.

Larger issues might require more planning and more steps in the citizen engagement plan. Say that a municipality wants to install a sewage system. Such a situation can spiral out of control and create distrust between citizens and the munici-
pality. A citizen engagement plan for this kind of project would involve many steps and opportunities for participation from across the community.

A plan will help identify why citizen participation is necessary, what it is you hope to achieve, and the processes you will use to get there. The sections of this guide are organized around the main steps in a plan. Depending on the issue you're working on, you can choose the techniques and steps that are most applicable to your needs and goals.

Step 1: Define the Issue

What is the specific community problem or issue you want to address? It's often helpful to frame the problem as an issue for which the community needs to discuss alternatives, solutions, and consequences. Examples include youth opportunities (rather than youth curfews), economic development (rather than the proposed "big-box" store), or environmental quality (rather than the proposed landfill). This allows multiple community groups to define the issue and identify a wider range of solutions. Framing an issue in positive or neutral terms sets the right tone from the start.

You will also want to be sure that the scope of the problem is appropriate and feasible. Tasks that are too broad and vague are likely to fail. Such goals as "bringing prosperity to all of ABC County" are probably not realistic. "Creating a program to encourage entrepreneurship and support existing small businesses" is more likely to attract people and more likely to bear fruit. Tasks that are too narrow are unlikely to attract a wide variety of people. For example, an effort to find a tenant for one vacant downtown store doesn't need a 21-person, blue-ribbon task force that meets weekly for a year. Consider broadening such an issue to "increase the number of downtown buildings under lease" or "make the downtown more attractive to shoppers on foot." If you have a small problem that needs to be addressed quickly, by all means, engage willing citizens. But keep the effort proportionate to the problem.

Step 2: Identify the Purpose and Degree of Citizen Engagement

Ask yourself and your group this question: Why do you need or want people to get involved in your project? You need to identify what you want to accomplish by getting people involved. These goals should be determined at the outset. You should also choose a method that is suitable to the goal.

A few questions to help you identify your goals:

• *Do you want to inform people about a project, or help them understand a problem or opportunity? Do you need more information from citizens to make a decision?* Primary techniques to inform include public opinion polling, needs assessments, and public hearings. (More information about the methods will be provided in the next section.)

• *Do you want to get public feedback about a project, program or decision? Do you want to stimulate public debate about the issue?* Primary methods used to consult the public include community meetings, Delphi techniques, and roundtable discussions (focus groups).

• *Do you want to work directly with citizens throughout the decision-making process, drawing on their expertise to make recommendations?* Primary tools to engage the public include dialogue sessions, citizen juries, public issues forums, and charettes.

• *Do you want to create long-term partnerships among participants and community groups that will implement the solutions they create?* Primary tools for this goal include study circles and community task forces.

Any one of these approaches might be appropriate. Which one is best depends on:
• the issue at hand;
• your organization's goals;
• the stage in the process;
• the stakeholders involved (all those that can affect or will be affected by the decisions); and
• legal and administrative restrictions.

There are a number of tools, including interviews and surveys, that you can use to engage citizens in your project.

Many public agencies require public comment periods and/or public hearings for proposals and rule changes. Be sure to consult with your organizations' by-laws and administrative policies as you develop your plan.

You may identify multiple purposes for encouraging community participation in your project. In this case, you might devise a multi-step plan that uses different levels of involvement at each stage. For example:
1. you might hold a series of roundtable discussions to identify the major community issues;
2. then administer a survey to gauge overall community opinions about these issues; and
3. have a community meeting to publicize results.

Multiple contacts with the community over time help to establish the credibility of your organization. It also shows that you have a vested interest in the issue and in the community's well-being over the long term.

Engagement efforts that seem too short given the importance of the topic or which seem to seek limited citizen input on controversial ideas will lose credibility and, ultimately, community support. Such mistakes often lead to alarmed citizens during the final stages of a project and may lead to angry citizens who attend meetings to derail a process that is nearly complete. Even if such a project is completed on schedule, the project will likely be seen as "ramrodded" through the process. The group that initiated and carried out the project is likely to see its credibility damaged and future projects viewed with immediate suspicion.

At this stage, it is a good idea to develop a project team to plan the engagement process. The team would have the following responsibilities:
• selecting tools for citizen participation;
• identifying and recruiting participants;
• publicizing the effort;
• developing background information;
• designing benchmarks and criteria for evaluation;
• reporting the outcomes of the process; and
• making recommendations based on the outcomes.

This team should represent a diverse group of citizens and organizations – the same types of people that you would like to see participating in the process.

Step 3: Identify Tools for Engaging Citizens

There are a number of tools that you can use to engage citizens in your project. In this section, the tools are arranged according to the following goals: to inform, to consult, to engage and to collaborate. Links to more detailed information about the tools are in the Resource Section at the end of the guide.

To Inform
Interviews and Surveys

Interviews and surveys are methods for identifying and prioritizing issues within a community.

The information provides decision-makers with broad-based, reliable, and valid data to craft policies and programs and gauge the impact of these policies and programs on community groups. Using this information, you could:
• describe the demographic characteristics of local residents;
• assess citizens' priority areas related to issues, problems, and opportunities;
• provide citizens a platform to voice their opinions;
• assess relative support for policy or program initiatives; and
• evaluate and assess the impact of current programs, policies, and services provided in the community.

An example might be regularly surveying program participants to gather impact data that can be shared with funding agencies. Another example is a community-wide human services needs assessment, which identifies the type of social services needed in the community.

There are two main approaches to gathering data from community residents that we cover here: key contact interviews and surveys.

Key Contact Interviews

Key contact interviews are discussions with individuals who have first-hand knowledge of and experience in the community or organization. The individuals interviewed can offer their insight into how the community or organization works, the primary issues of concern, and potential opportunities for growth and change. Key contact interviews are especially useful for getting in-depth information from a limited number of experts, particularly about sensitive or pressing topics.

Key contacts are members of the community who have had professional training, who possess personal knowledge and experience, who have access to resources, or hold prominent positions in the community. Key contacts may include elected officials, leaders of public service organizations, agency administrators, service agency professionals or influential individuals within community or nonprofit organizations.

For example, if you are studying environmental issues in the area, key contacts might include leaders of local environmental groups, land use planning officials, county conservation district officials, health agency administrators, and natural science teachers in the school district. Often, a snowball technique is used, in which key contacts are asked to identify other individuals with important information on the topic. Those additional individuals also are asked to provide information.

Surveys

The purpose of surveys is to systematically collect data from a set of community residents. Information is gathered through a carefully designed questionnaire.

Surveys can be used to learn more about your community, such as:
 • demographic characteristics, such as age, sex, income, education;
 • access to community resources, such as health care and/or insurance, work sites, exercise and recreational opportunities, transportation options;
 • opinions, attitudes, or beliefs about community issues or policies; and
 • behaviors in relation to community services or programs (such as the use of recycling facilities, and visits to parks/recreation centers).

Surveys can also help to evaluate how specific programs or services are used.

Conducting a survey that gives you useful, valid information requires careful attention to how you select people to survey, how you ask questions, how you distribute the survey, and how you analyze the survey data.

Selecting people to survey: First, define the specific group of people you want your survey information to represent. For example, if you want to know how people evaluated county health services, you need to talk with users of that service. You need to clearly define which services and what it means to be a 'user' (i.e., one visit versus regular client, one service versus multiple, etc.).

In some situations, you will be able to find, recruit, and survey all the individuals you need. For example, you might be able to recruit the 50 people who participated in a community exercise program in the last year. However, in most situations, you will not have enough money to contact everyone in this population. Instead, you will need to select a sample, or a small portion, of the entire population. A good sample accurately represents the whole population. This allows you to assume that the patterns you see in your survey findings are a representation of the patterns you would have seen if you had surveyed the entire population.

Combining Key Contact Interviews and Surveys in Potter County

The Potter County Human Services Agency recognized that they did not have the information they needed to make policies or decisions, particularly in the wake of recent changes in the local economy. They chose to conduct a needs assessment, using a combination of key contact interviews and surveys.

They first developed a team of agencies and organizations within Potter County as well as faculty and students at Penn State University. Then team members contacted representatives of 40 agencies and organizations within the county and conducted key contact interviews to gather suggestions for topics to include in the survey.

Because of this diverse input, the needs assessment focused on a broad set of issues and needs facing the county, including services, economic development, family and youth needs, education, emergency management and volunteering.

A mail survey was sent to 800 randomly selected county households in the summer of 2006; of which 413 were returned. The findings provided Potter County agencies and organizations with information to allocate resources, seek funding, target programming, and create new programs for county residents.

Generally, random samples are the best way to ensure that the sample represents the population. Random sampling ensures that each person has an equal probability of being selected for the survey. Approaches not based on random sampling are appropriate when trying to contact a hard-to-reach population, or when trying to reach an "unofficial" group (such as community leaders). Non-random selection techniques include snowball sampling (asking each person to identify additional people) and convenience sampling (contacting people at a location they are likely to be, such as a store).

Once you've identified whom you want to learn about, you need to develop a contact list for these people. You may be able to use existing lists (such as registered program participants), or you may have to work with other organizations to develop a list (such as through tax records or telephone books) or buy a list from a business that specializes in survey research. No matter what source you use, be sure to think about who is not on the list. For example, tax records will not include renters, and telephone books can be very out-of-date and do not include unpublished numbers or cell phone numbers.

Asking good questions: Here are a few guidelines for writing good survey questions. Questions should:
 • be straightforward and easy to understand for everyone you survey;
 • ask about only one issue;
 • be short and specific;

• use standard English (or other language appropriate to the sample);

• avoid biased words and should not guide the reader to a particular or preferred answer;

• offer a balanced viewpoint (ask about both positives and negatives);

• have answer categories that include all possible answers and do not overlap; and

• invite people to answer.

The format of the survey can affect people's willingness to fill it out. Surveys should be:

• formatted attractively, clearly printed, well organized, and easy to complete;

• as short as possible – ask only those questions related to your goals and objectives;

• organized logically with simple, non-threatening questions in the beginning; and

• a small burden on participants.

Distributing the survey: Surveys can be distributed in multiple ways, each with their own advantages and disadvantages. Some of the most common distribution methods include:

• Mail: these are cost-effective, reaching a large group for a relatively low-cost per contact. However, they are not cheap: postage, printing, stuffing envelopes and tracking returns all take time and money. Mail methods may not work for some potential respondents, such as those with low reading/writing skills.

• Hand out: surveys are handed out to a group of people attending an event or location. The surveys can be collected on site, mailed back, or collected at a later date. The number of events may limit the total sample size, and the sample may not be representative.

• Drop-off/pick-up: teams of volunteers visit different parts of the community over several days, dropping off the surveys in the morning and picking them up later that day. A return envelope may also be provided for those not at home during the pick-up time.

• Telephone: a well-trained interviewer establishes rapport, answers questions, and keeps the survey short. However, the sample may not be representative because it may be difficult to get a complete and accurate telephone list and would exclude those who do not have telephones in their homes. Telephone surveys can be very expensive to conduct because of personnel and telephone costs.

• Face-to-face: this works well for populations that would not be able to respond to other approaches, such as those without telephones or who cannot read. However, this approach takes significant time and money, and results in a small sample size.

• Electronic (web, email): web and email surveys are convenient for participants and make data entry very easy. Electronic surveys will not work for those who do not have access to a computer and the Internet, or

without the computer skills needed to complete the survey.

Analyzing the data: Specific analyses will depend on your survey, but statistics most often used are percentages and averages. These statistics can be calculated using basic spreadsheet software (such as Microsoft Excel). Some examples might include the percentage of people who participate in programs, or who would like to participate in programs if they were offered. You can develop prioritized lists of actions that municipal officials can implement. For instance, survey data can tell you the level of interest consumers have in buying locally produced food, or the average amount that consumers spend when they go to the farmers' market. Reports from quality surveys can be very powerful and provide important information to guide decision-making.

Public Hearings

Public hearings are formal meetings at which individuals present official statements, their personal positions, or the positions of their organizations. These types of hearings are often required when an agency or organization is creating or changing policies or rules. Public hearings offer the opportunity for statements to be included as part of the legal proceedings.

Public hearings are useful forums for hearing the range of community opinions about an issue. Typical public hearings consist of formal testimony and statements by individuals and organizations. Other options exist, however, that can increase the interaction among participants and officials. For example, moderated small group discussions (such as the nominal group process described below) can be used to solicit input. Notes can be taken of these discussions and can be included in the formal record. Instead of one large meeting, several small meetings could be held at various times and locations, or with specific affected groups.

To Consult

Nominal Group Process

The nominal group process is a good method to use when you want to brainstorm, gather ideas, and prioritize issues. This process works best when a larger group of people is first brought together to discuss a community issue or problem.

Participants then break into small groups of about six to 10 people. Each small group is given a question and the group members spend a few minutes writing down their ideas. After everyone has a chance to think about the question, they share their ideas with each other, each taking a turn, until all ideas are listed. A moderator or note-taker keeps track of all the ideas mentioned. A good moderator enhances this process by: seeking input from all members of the group; making sure no

Focus groups are a powerful way to collect ideas, opinions, experiences, or beliefs about community issues.

one dominates the discussion; keeping the group focused on the subject at hand; and staying within established timeframes.

The note-taker from each small group then reports back to the larger group. This larger group then prioritizes the ideas. There are a few different techniques that can be used to prioritize, but most often participants vote to pick the ideas that have the highest priority for action. This prioritized list is then presented to the sponsoring organization.

Because the nominal group process uses small group discussions, it encourages the participation of those who may not feel comfortable talking in larger groups. It can be used multiple times, to gather ideas from different groups within the community.

Delphi Technique

The Delphi technique, like the nominal group process, is used to generate and prioritize ideas. The Delphi technique does not require face-to-face meetings, so it is particularly useful to gather ideas from a large group or from people who cannot travel to a central location (such as people without transportation or who are spread out geographically). Instead, participants are given a series of surveys they can complete in their own time.

The basic idea of the Delphi technique is to give participants a chance to first give their ideas then react to the ideas of all the other participants in the process. First, select a group of people to participate. Depending on the issue you want to learn about, these could be key contacts (people with knowledge of and experience in the community), members of a specific set of organizations, or a diverse set of community residents. All of these people are given a survey that asks them to list ideas about community problems, causes, and potential solutions. Then a report is written that summarizes all of the ideas gathered from the survey. This report is sent to the same set of people as the first survey, along with another survey. This second survey asks participants to react to the ideas outlined in the report and to prioritize the action steps.

Based on the information from both surveys, another

report is written and shared with all participants as well as the sponsoring organization or group.

Roundtable Discussions (focus groups)

Focus groups are facilitated discussions with a small group of people (8-10). Focus groups are a powerful way to collect ideas, opinions, experiences, or beliefs about community issues. Focus groups allow for in-depth discussion of an issue, and the opportunity to clarify ideas and statements. Often, discussions between participants can yield new insights, beyond individual perspectives.

Focus group participants are selected because they have some knowledge and experience with the issue. For example, focus groups about youth opportunities in the community might include teachers and school district personnel, coaches or teachers in extra-curricular activities (arts, sports, music, science), parks and recreation officials, local nonprofit groups (YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, Boy/Girl Scouts), and youth.

It is also important to make sure that the mix of people within a focus group will lead to good discussion, and that people feel comfortable sharing their thoughts. Generally, people within each focus group should be similar in background (such as age, ethnicity, or economic status) or have experience with the issue. For the focus groups on youth opportunities, it would be particularly important to have separate groups for the youth participants, who may not feel comfortable talking in a group with adults.

Generally it's a good rule of thumb to conduct two to three focus groups for each different type of group. It's best to have more than one to ensure that the focus groups cover the range of themes and discussions within the population. The more focus groups you can afford, the greater the chances of capturing discussions that accurately reflect the most common views. For example, you would want to conduct two to three focus groups with adults on youth opportunities in the community, and two to three focus groups with the youth.

Facilitators in focus groups use a discussion guide. This guide is a script that covers the introduction of all the participants, the purpose of the focus group, the ground rules for discussion, the focus group questions, and the closing statements. The discussion guide should be the same across all the focus groups.

The main goal of facilitators is to make sure that the environment allows everyone to feel comfortable sharing their experiences and thoughts. This means that a good facilitator will enforce the ground rules, which often include: giving everyone the chance to speak, not making judgments about others' experiences, avoiding personal attacks, and listening to each other. The facilitators' responsibilities also include asking questions, clarifying any statements that might be unclear, intervening if discussions become heated, and keeping the group on time and on task. In addition to the facilitator, each focus

group has a note-taker. (Audio-recording is also an option.)

To Engage

Public Issues Forums

Public issues forums bring together a group of citizens to explore an issue of local or regional interest, such as land use, transportation, health care access, and economic growth. The idea behind this approach is that most people may not have had the opportunity to learn and form an opinion about the issue. The forum approach allows each person to learn and think about the issue through moderated small group discussions with other community members who may have differing viewpoints. Policymakers use this information to guide decision-making.

The size and duration of issues forums vary; they can be single small or large community meetings, or on-going meetings that occur regularly in a public building or someone's home. Participants self-select, they are not chosen by an external group (although how participants are invited will influence the composition of the group). Prior to the forum, each participant is given a neutral issue discussion guide that presents the overall problem and then three to four broad approaches. During the forum, small groups of participants discuss the issue, what appeals to them or concerns them about the potential approaches, and the costs, consequences and trade-offs of the approaches. The results of the forum are shared with policymakers.

Generally, multiple community organizations partner to plan issues forums and recruit participants. They also ensure that the discussion guide is nonpartisan and complete. This group also oversees the selection and training of moderators for the forum discussions.

Citizens Panels

Citizens panels bring together a random sample of 12 to 24 people, often called a "jury," who represent the community. The end result of a citizens panel is a set of guidelines, preferred options, and recommendations for decision makers.

The jury is given a charge, usually in the form of a question or series of questions. Participants then have the opportunity to read background materials and hear testimony from and question experts on the issue. Moderated small group discussions consider multiple points of view on the issue, and the group ultimately reach a consensus on the best course of action. The panels present their recommendations at a public hearing. Juries can be held within a short time period (about one week) or spread out over a series of months.

A core element of the citizens panel is the random selection of jury members. Recruitment starts with a telephone survey that asks about opinions and attitudes

on the issue as well as demographic information. Individuals who indicate interest are added to the jury pool. Jurors are selected from the jury pool randomly to represent the diversity within the community.

Charrettes

Charrettes are community workshops that draw together a set of community members to develop a vision for the community's land use and design. (However, it is possible to use the format to address other issues.) Professional facilitators host the meeting, and create opportunities for structured discussion about participants' preferences for the layout of the community. Charrettes are usually intensive and interactive, taking place over a short period of time (often two to three days or a short series of evening sessions).

Charrettes use a mix of techniques, such as background material, expert presentations, on-site visits, hypothetical case studies, and photographs and maps. Through the process, participants develop their set of preferences and expectations for the community's design and land use and engage in problem-solving exercises that help them think through the options and trade-offs. The result of a charrette is usually a framework or guiding document for planners, community development practitioners, and local officials as they make decisions about community investments, economic growth and development, and allowable land uses.

To Collaborate

Study Circles

Study circles are small groups of diverse citizens (eight to 12 people) meeting multiple times to discuss an issue of local concern. Study circles can occur individually or as part of a community-wide project in which multiple groups meet during the same time period. These community-wide projects end in an "action forum," where all study circle participants come together to discuss their findings and develop an action strategy to address the community problem.

Individuals are recruited and assigned to study circles so that each circle is diverse and representative of the community. Because study circles meet several times, participants build relationships of trust and common concerns. The study circle process creates an environment in which individuals can have constructive, respectful conversations. Trained facilitators moderate the discussions, and help the group establish agreed-upon ground rules. Study circle participants share multiple viewpoints about the issue, examine potential solutions, and identify preferred approaches. The community-wide public meeting, where the circles present their findings and recommendations, are often used to develop community task forces or action teams around the issues identified by the circles.

Community Task Forces

A task force is a group of community volunteers that engages in multiple stages of a community improvement project, including defining the issues, gathering information, creating recommendations, developing action steps, and implementing action steps.

Generally, community task forces are given a charge, such as addressing community concerns like economic growth, racism, crime, education, health care, or land use. Task forces often have a 'kick-off' event, such as a forum or public meeting, to give the group their charge and recruit additional members. One common activity of task forces is to conduct their own research to learn about the issue, such as by holding focus groups, conducting listening sessions, or administering surveys. As with most approaches, participant diversity is crucial. It is also essential that organizations that would be called on to implement recommendations be represented within the task force. By bringing representatives of community organizations and agencies together, it is easier to coordinate both new and on-going activities.

Electronic Methods of Deliberation

Increasing numbers of businesses, households, and organizations have access to the Internet and email. Online access allows you to engage a larger portion of the public, in multiple ways, in discussions concerning community issues. Websites, discussion boards, list serves,

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> ### Blue Ribbon Commission for Agriculture in Lancaster County
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> Concern about development pressures, land use conflicts, and changes in agriculture led the Lancaster County Board of Commissioners to appoint a Blue Ribbon Commission in 2005 to develop a set of recommendations related to the future growth of agriculture in the county. The commission conducted several listening sessions, and provided a phone line and website for farmers to provide additional input. Based on the information received, the commission created a task force with multiple work groups, composed of community volunteers, to prioritize projects, identify specific action steps, and initiate actions to achieve recommendations. For more information, visit www.blueribbonag.org/index.asp.

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bulletin boards, and video-teleconferencing provide avenues for individuals to access background materials and engage with experts and other participants (sometimes from far away) to offer suggestions, give recommendations, discuss options, and identify preferences. Electronic access can also help participants overcome barriers to participation, such as geographic location or availability.

For example, online community dialogues allow participants to discuss a set of issues over a period of a few weeks. The sponsoring organization provides panelists and moderators to maintain the conversation. Participants respond to questions or potential recommendations offered by the panelists each day. The result is a set of prioritized issues and policy recommendations that can be used by decision-makers within the sponsoring organization.

Because not everyone has access, electronic methods are often matched with or offered as an alternative to face-to-face participation methods. For example, participants can read notes from face-to-face meetings on a website or bulletin board, and have the opportunity to provide additional thoughts or feedback through a moderated discussion list. Electronic communication methods, such as email updates and e-newsletters, are particularly important for keeping in touch with participants and sharing information and announcements.

Getting Help to Use These Techniques

Many of these approaches may seem daunting. Several of them involve large investments of time and resources – perhaps more than you think your organization can afford. The Additional Resources section at the end of the guide lists several sources for your review.

In addition, there are a number of local and statewide agencies, associations, and offices that may be able to

assist your organization or link you to other available resources. These might include the Penn State Cooperative Extension office in your county, the Local Development District, economic and community development agencies, and governmental associations. Other local community organizations that have tried one of these methods may be able to provide you with assistance in getting started or facilitating meetings.

Another good option includes colleges and universities in your local area. Faculty and students are often looking for opportunities to work with community groups. Often, the public relations department of a college or university will be able to connect you with the appropriate department, professor or on-campus organization.

Finally, you might consider hiring a consultant if you need specialized expertise. Because consultants are experts in their field, they bring knowledge, training, and experience to assist your organization as it decides among the options.

Here are a few tips to keep in mind as you search for and retain a consultant.
• Make sure you know exactly what it is you want to accomplish, and what you want the consultant to provide. Make these expectations clear to the consultant.
• Designate one person as the contact within your organization to coordinate the selection process and communicate with the consultant.
• Make sure that key members of your organization are all in agreement about which consultant to hire and to work with the consultant once hired.
• Match the selection process to the size of the job you're asking the consultant to do.
• Check the consultant's qualifications and past performance yourself.
• Make the selection process fair: don't ask for a large number of applications or interviews if you've already made your choice, and don't allow consultants to witness each other's interviews.
• Use multiple criteria to make your selection, not just cost estimates.

A number of criteria may be used to select consultants. Here are a few questions to help you think about the criteria you would use.
• Does the consultant have experience and skills in facilitating public meetings?
• Is the consultant familiar with the issue and the local community?
• Will the consultant be able to develop a good working relationship with your organization's members?
• Does the consultant want to do the work?
• To what extent is the consultant willing to tailor the project and the final product to the unique needs of your organization?
• What is the size of the firm? What resources does the

consultant bring? Who has decision-making authority?
• Did the consultant stay within budget and deliver on time in previous projects?

Step 4: Identify Individuals and Groups That Need To Be Involved

Who needs to be part of your project in order to accomplish your goals? Each person brings a set of skills, viewpoints, experiences, resources, and networks to projects. You need to identify what your project needs, what it already has, what it is missing, and who can fill in these missing pieces. Identify groups and individuals that will represent the diversity of your community, especially those who may traditionally be underrepresented in community efforts. It's particularly important to include stakeholders — those people who can influence how a decision is implemented, and who may be affected by the decision. It is crucial to include all stakeholders in the process from the beginning. They can help make things happen (or stop them from happening), and provide important information about the potential impacts of your group's decisions.

The kinds of groups and individuals you might consider including in your efforts include those that are more "established" as community leaders, such as government and other political officials, business representatives, news media members, realtors and developers, and representatives from community and non-profit organizations. These individuals have significant experience with community affairs, and can often bring important skills and resources to the project. They may be "gatekeepers" to additional resources and information, such as government bodies and grants.

Another place to look is existing community groups, such as those organized around neighborhood, environ-

Involving Youth

Youth can offer new viewpoints and have valuable skills and abilities. Try to reach youth in schools by contacting the administration or school board. You will have to demonstrate clearly that you are a non-profit organization with a mission of education.

Also, you can sometimes reach youth through your website. You would have to advertise to them and develop a section specially designed for them. If youth feel that there has been genuine space created for them and their ideas and issues, they are likely to stay engaged. Attracting youth may be challenging, and it demands effort and creativity, but the payoff is having a new generation of leaders ready to step in.

The Center for Rural Pennsylvania

ment, health, humanitarian, and education issues. It is also necessary to include those groups in the community that are often overlooked. These might include (depending on your community): women, minorities, retirees, youth, newcomers, immigrants, and those with low income.

Other good but uncommon groups to tap are those who have disagreed with or opposed you in the past. Some municipal officials who have had to handle opposition and criticism point out that those who care enough to oppose you by definition care about the same issues you do. Thus, it might be to your advantage to seek those people out (assuming that their opposition to your ideas is not so vehement that you won't be able to work together).

Generally, more people will become involved if an issue directly affects them. Residents of a community might fear that a proposed change will harm them, their families or their property values. Others might not like the direction in which issues are headed. You can help these people by giving them an outlet for productive action. The challenge will be to keep them involved if/when the issue is resolved.

If you decide to recruit from issue-interested citizens, it is important to bring them in early so they can help formulate the solution to the matter that concerns them. Without "ownership" of the issue and solution, they will lack motivation to help resolve the matter and will likely lose interest in not only the issue but also your organization.

Get Ready to Recruit

Before you start working to bring in volunteers, it's important that your organization and the process be clear. For example, is it clear which committee handles what? Do the names of your committees clearly describe what they do? Think of this analogy: Have you ever tried to call your county office and been baffled by the variety of departments and what each does? Does dog licensing fall under the sheriff's department or the county treasurer's department? The problem is the same for those who are interested in working with your organization.

The second important housekeeping item is strong leadership. People want to work with organizations that have leaders who can be understood and respected. If your leadership is too diffuse, or if there are no clear leaders (just mysterious committees), many people will perceive that the organization doesn't have clear objectives or that no one is in control. In general, people like to be led by a real, live human being, not a committee. Don't forget that for many volunteers, the leader is the organization.

Remove Participation Barriers

Once you've identified who should participate in your effort, you need to remove barriers to their participation.

A plan for recruiting participants needs to identify who will be invited, how they will be contacted, and who will be responsible for inviting each group or individual.

Ensure that you have multiple meeting dates/times and locations, to accommodate all types of participants. You might consider arranging transportation for those without access to cars or who cannot drive. If lack of child care is a potential barrier, arrange for on-site child care. You might also provide opportunities for those who could not attend the meetings in person to follow the progress of the group and submit comments, by providing an on-line community website with a calendar of events, municipal news, and a discussion forum.

Some people may not feel comfortable because of social barriers, such as knowledge of the issue, comfort level with the group, language differences, or skills in community processes. You might consider hosting an orientation meeting for participants to learn about the group, the issues at hand, and the processes before the group officially meets.

Step 5: Develop a Plan for Recruiting and Retaining Participants

Recruitment

A plan for recruiting participants needs to identify who will be invited, how they will be contacted, and who will be responsible for inviting each group or individual. Recruitment generally occurs through "connectors" and "persuaders." Connectors are those who link people across multiple organizations and groups. These are the people who seem to know someone from every group, and can provide access to potential participants from that group. Persuaders are those who have credibility within the groups you're trying to reach. These individuals can speak to the legitimacy of your organization's efforts, and the contribution that potential participants could make in representing their group.

Have a System

For both single events and on-going volunteer opportunities, your organization should develop or use a system by which people can indicate their interest. Having a "talent bank" – a file of people who have expressed an interest in helping your organization – can help you fill slots quickly.

If you already have a talent bank, make sure that it works effectively by tracking what happens when someone indicates his or her interest. Consider giving responsibility for recruitment and tracking interest to a single person or sub-committee. A regular system will ensure that these records will be available in the future, even if current leaders are no longer there.

Ultimately, you might not be able to make use of everyone who applies, but each expression of interest should be evaluated and have a specific outcome (accept, defer, or reject). Nothing is more discouraging to a volunteer than expressing interest and never hearing a word. It might be a good idea to routinely send applicants a letter thanking them for their interest and explaining how the system works and whether or not they are a good match for your organization. Regardless of the decision, make sure that the applicants know they have been considered. If deferring, tell them you will keep their information on file, and there may be a match for their skills in the future (be as specific as you can about how and when).

Personal contact is the best means for any of these decisions. Phone calls and face-to-face meetings are the most effective methods for recruiting. The essence of the message should be, "We value you and we need you."

Getting the Word Out

If your organization uses a talent bank, publicize how people can apply and how the system works. Make it clear that potential volunteers will be matched to positions based on their interests, skills and experiences. Be sure that the forms or applications are always available, and in several different places (paper form at your office, at events, on your website). In addition, your leaders and members should always be approachable by people who are interested in serving but do not know about the talent bank or do not want to make their interests known that way. Some potential volunteers might be more comfortable approaching a leader one-on-one. Leaders should understand how to handle such approaches and make the volunteer comfortable and welcomed.

Recruitment Avenues

Here are a few ideas for recruiting volunteers.
• Use existing leaders and members to recruit. It might be a goal of each existing volunteer to "recruit their replacement" so that they feel comfortable stepping away and allowing someone else to participate and provide fresh ideas.
• Partner with other organizations that have similar goals. People are more willing to come to an event or investigate volunteering if the invitation comes through a group they already know and trust.

• Use multiple methods and media. Be aware of the media most used by the group you are trying to target.
• Target your recruitment to those most affected by the issue.
• Personal contact (face-to-face, phone calls) is the most effective recruitment method.

Recruitment Materials

Your materials should tell the story of your organization and what you want to accomplish. It should also describe potential volunteer opportunities in as much detail as possible and provide contact information if someone wants to participate.

The actual materials need to be simple and short. Boil down your message into three or four main points for the reader to walk away with. If your group routinely handles topics with a scientific element, you have to be especially careful to make sure that your messages are understandable to the layperson. Using scientific terms or industry jargon will confuse your audience and serve as a barrier to potential volunteers.

Tell your audience exactly what you want them to do with the information. Motivate them with the information, but give them an outlet to act on that information through your organization or project (by volunteering, by giving money, by writing a letter, etc.).

Although personal contact is best, mailed materials can be effective if they have a personal touch.

Finally, be repetitive. People need to hear a message three or more times before they pay attention to it.

Retention

Once people have agreed to participate, you will have to work hard to keep them connected. Here are a few ways to do this:
• define their roles;
• make them accountable for their assignments;
• respect their opinions and viewpoints;
• give them opportunities to grow;
• help them create relationships within and outside the organization;
• reward their accomplishments; and
• recognize their contributions to the overall effort.

Volunteers who are happy with their experiences are the best recruiters for and champions of your organization. On the other hand, nothing is more draining than having good volunteers leave.

Match volunteers to jobs that fit their interests, skills and experiences. If they are task-oriented, have them stuff or stamp envelopes. If they like more abstract ideas, put them on a planning or long-range strategy committee. If they enjoy being around other people, give them tasks that require networking and socializing. Avoid putting volunteers into positions that make them

uncomfortable. For example, many people do not like fundraising; even if they do, be sure to know what kind of fundraising they are comfortable doing. Some people might be comfortable selling raffle tickets but uncomfortable approaching a wealthy person to make a contribution. When they have assignments that match their interests, volunteers will be happier.

Rewards

Consider paying for volunteers to receive professional certification credits or advanced training. Offering such training validates the importance of their involvement and shows that you are willing to invest in them. Offer chances for your volunteers to become more educated about the matters for which they are responsible. For example, if you have a planning commission, offer access to planning courses or other materials to keep current with the latest thinking in the field. There is a cost to providing these rewards, but if your organization has sufficient funding, consider it to be an investment in the future success of your organization.

> Meetings that are structured and conducted efficiently will provide the best opportunity for useful public participation.

If your organization holds annual conferences, arrange breakout sessions that bring volunteers together from the same region. This gives people a chance to engage and talk with others near them. They'll also have a chance to discuss local issues in the context of the new information from the conference or seminar.

Think of ways to give your volunteers a break on costs related to participation in your organization. For volunteers who have a certain number of years of service, or who go above and beyond, give them a percentage off their annual dues. Giving everyone a t-shirt or other memento at the end of the project or year can help. If you can, have a volunteer appreciation awards dinner and give out plaques, certificates of appreciation and other rewards. See if a local youth organization would be willing to create and present awards to outstanding community volunteers for making the community better for future generations. Although not every organization can afford such an event, for those that can, it offers a high return (loyalty) for a reasonable cost.

Although retention is an essential goal, groups need to recognize that volunteers and members go through cycles of involvement, in relation to family, work, and other community obligations. Volunteers need to feel that it is acceptable for their involvement to increase and decrease over time, and that they are always welcome back. Good recruitment/retention plans allow for volunteer exit and re-entry, and recruit continually to replace those who exit.

Step 6: Create a Positive Environment for Citizen Engagement

To encourage continued participation, you must continue offering worthwhile experiences and opportunities. Part of this is organizing and running effective and efficient meetings and resolving any conflict fairly and efficiently. Another important part is making sure that the participants feel comfortable talking about and sharing their ideas during meetings and that their ideas are seriously considered.

Making Meetings Work

Community decisions can rarely be made without meetings. Meetings that are structured and conducted efficiently will provide the best opportunity for useful public participation. Poorly organized and run meetings make participants feel as if they wasted their time, and they are not likely to return. Chaotic meetings also usually fail to accomplish their goals and reflect badly on the sponsoring organization.

The most important work for a meeting occurs beforehand by preparing the goals, objectives and agenda, and assigning individual responsibilities. Here are a few considerations as you plan:

- Only hold a meeting if necessary. Ask yourself: Can the goal be accomplished another way, perhaps by a conference call or exchange of emails?
- Establish meeting objectives. This will set the focus of the meeting and a standard by which the success of the meeting can be measured. Objectives should stress tangible outcomes (such as a written timeline of events) not the processes used to achieve the outcome (discussion of the timeline contents).
- Create an agenda that lists topics for discussion, a presenter or discussion leader for each topic and the time allotted for each topic.
- Circulate meeting information to all participants prior to the meeting, including meeting objectives, meeting agenda, location/date/time, background information and assigned items for preparation.
- Encourage participants to be at the meeting.
- Consider inviting a neutral person to facilitate if the discussion could be sensitive or controversial.

During the meeting, it is essential that participants feel there is respect for all participants and their input. Meetings must start on time so as not to punish those who are punctual. This also sets the stage for how serious you are about making the meeting effective. Stay on schedule, and stay on the topic at hand. Meeting participants need to arrive on time, be prepared by having read the materials, participate in a constructive manner, and be respectful of other participants' time and thoughts.

At the beginning of the meeting, establish and post ground rules and hold people to them. You might consider listing your primary ground rules on the agenda. If you have new attendees, review the ground rules at the beginning of the meeting.

Ground rules could cover:
• expectations for participation and attendance;
• discussions that maintain momentum and reach closure;
• degree of confidentiality of discussions;
• how decisions will be made;
• roles of meeting leaders and participants; and
• how disagreements should be expressed and handled.

Meeting notes – particularly decisions or action items – must be recorded and made part of your group's meeting archives. Action items should designate the person responsible for the action.

End the meeting on time and on a positive note. An effective ending is to review and evaluate the meeting. Review actions and assignments, and discuss follow-up measures. Discuss whether all meeting objectives were accomplished, and which ones should be carried over to the next meeting. Identify things that worked well and what can be improved at the next meeting. Set the time for the next meeting and ask participants if they can attend (this increases their commitment). Tell participants when meeting minutes and/or actions will be reported back to them to help keep the momentum going.

After the meeting, the chair or leader should:
• follow up with individuals responsible for action items;
• check with the secretary for clarity of the minutes and distribute the minutes;
• transfer leftover agenda items to the next meeting's agenda; and
• send thank-you notes to guest speakers.

Developing an Agenda

A good agenda is key to a good meeting. The thought required to build the agenda clarifies the meeting's purpose and objectives and identifies strategies that will increase the prospects for success.

Agendas allow for better management of meeting time. For example, if it is anticipated that a large number of public participants will be present and providing comment, time can be specifically set aside for public comment. This allowance will increase the chances that all agenda items will be attended to and the meeting will end on time.

Distribution of the agenda prior to the meeting alerts members to the meeting's purpose, the items under consideration, and the homework that might be required. It allows members to suggest changes and determine if there are items they need to learn more about or voice their opinion on. It also allows them time to prepare any materials they might need. Posting the agenda allows members or citizens that cannot attend the meeting to provide input prior to the meeting when discussion or action will take place.

During the meeting, the agenda can focus discussion, highlight individual responsibilities, and recognize time constraints. It also can serve as a checklist to ensure that all items are covered, and provides for a record of progress and achievement. A well prepared agenda will show participants that the meeting has an established structure, which in turn will help maintain order.

Agenda Content

Agendas can vary depending on the type of group and formality of the meeting. However, every agenda should contain the following fundamental elements:
1) Group identification or meeting name.
2) Time, date and location. Be sure to highlight any changes from the routine.
3) Purpose of the meeting.
4) List of anticipated participants.
5) Items to be discussed including a brief description of the items (including any attachments), with necessary background or other briefing material; goals, desired outcomes, or actions required; allotted time; and the person responsible for leading the discussion.

Agenda Order

Some groups have very structured bylaws or legislative mandates as to organizational make-up and processes. For these organizations, their standard order of business will most likely follow an established set format by which officers and committees are allocated time to meet their obligations, and provision is made in the agenda to make sure all necessary processes and actions are taken.

Other groups are more loosely structured, meeting only as needed and with no prescribed manner. In any case, an agenda allows members to know what to expect and the manner in which the meeting will be run.

For municipalities, an agenda that is developed and distributed in advance of a meeting will provide not only the direction and focus of the meeting, but also notice to the news media of what will be covered. This could result in news coverage about an upcoming meeting and increased citizen participation.

Following are additional tips for running effective meetings.
• Do not overload the agenda. Only priority items that need face-to-face consideration should be included.
• Regular meetings should generally last no longer than two hours. The beginning and ending times should be enforced.

• Items that involve the participation of guests should be scheduled early in the agenda. This will provide visitors with the option of leaving after their presentation.
• Place the most compelling items near the top of the agenda. Members will have more energy and be able to give their full effort to the item. This also encourages people to arrive on time.
• Group related items together. This avoids having to repeat background information and reduces confusion.

Establishing a Meeting Protocol

To proceed through a meeting, a protocol, or rules, must be established and agreed upon. The meeting chairperson has primary responsibility for making sure that everyone understands the rules and follows them. The procedure chosen by the organization should fit the group's needs. Procedures should strike a balance between structure and flexibility to encourage efficiency and participation.

For instance, some group decisions may best be made by consensus, which is the cooperative development of a decision that is acceptable enough so that all members of the group agree to support the decision. On the other hand, decisions by majority vote may be necessary due to time constraints or legislative mandate. The most commonly used standard code on parliamentary procedure is *Robert's Rules of Order* by Henry M. Robert. *Jefferson's Manual* and *Cushing's Manual* also contain legislative procedures.

Understanding Responsibilities of Leaders and Participants

The leader performs a number of tasks to ensure meeting effectiveness. The leader should:
• have materials ready and know what needs to be said;
• speak clearly;
• be confident and enthusiastic;
• assign someone to take attendance and minutes;
• encourage input from everyone;
• keep everyone focused on the specific item of discussion;
• make sure everyone understands what has been decided; and
• close on a positive note.
Meeting participants can do several things to improve meeting efficiency:
• be prepared to report or discuss meeting topics;
• stay focused on the discussion;
• demonstrate loyalty to the group by sacrificing, compromising, and accepting group decisions;
• be active listeners;
• support colleagues and demonstrate that their contributions are appreciated;
• practice confidentiality;
• criticize ideas, not individuals; and

• feel free to disagree during the discussion, but support the group decision once it has been made.
If a member cannot support the final decision, she or he should ask that the minutes reflect that a minority report will be filed.

Facilitating Meetings

It is important for a leader to be able to facilitate a meeting effectively. The group leader (facilitator or chairperson) is responsible for preparing for the meeting, guiding discussions, delegating work or finding volunteers for action steps, making sure the group is communicating effectively and is able to get work done, and following up after a meeting to be sure that members know their responsibilities.

The fundamental difference between a chairperson and a facilitator is the level or strength of direction provided in these roles. The chairperson, who is usually in a more formal role, makes rulings, determines procedures, rules people out of order, and so forth. The facilitator proposes, suggests, invites, and then consults with the participants to generate a consensus. The facilitator's "power" comes from the group; however, an effective chairperson will follow many of these same procedures.

It is the facilitator's responsibility to make sure all pertinent tasks are completed effectively. The facilitator does not have to shoulder the entire load, but can designate tasks to others. Members of the team can include a secretary or recorder (to record meeting notes), time-keeper (to enforce time restraints), and monitor (to evaluate and report on group process). Also, by assigning tasks to group members and having them help prepare for the meeting, a leader can help make all members an important part of the meeting process, which will encourage future participation.

The facilitator should remain neutral and be aware of his or her potential to dominate the group. Therefore, the facilitator should avoid talking a lot, not argue with group members, and recognize each member's comments.

Some effective strategies for meeting facilitators include:
• Clarify communication by summarizing lengthy contributions, relating one participant's ideas to another, requesting clarification on incomplete ideas, or allowing a group member to complete a statement if they are cut off.
• Establish an effective and well-understood set of ground rules.
• Accept feelings as valid data while seeing that ground rules are followed if the discussion gets heated or emotional. Summarize feelings as well as content.
• Restate problems or disagreements so that group members can work on a solution.
• Suggest a procedure or problem solving approach.
• Summarize and clarify direction at the end of each agenda item.

Creating Dialogue and Encouraging Productive Discussions

Frame the Issue

The manner by which an issue is approached, processed and acted on is extremely important to its ultimate resolution. To effectively deal with an issue, it is helpful to clarify it or frame it in a manner that puts focus on what the true problem is. In many cases, comments or concerns are expressed in a manner that doesn't necessarily focus on the real underlying issue(s). For example, a township may be planning for a new public sewage system. In response to the announcement of this project, concerned citizens communicate to their elected officials that they are opposed to public sewage in the municipality. However, this opposition may in fact be related to only certain components of the project, such as potential higher taxes, increased development pressure, loss of open space or environmental concerns. Instead, the issue could be presented as "growth planning," which would bring potential participants into the process from the early stages, and allow more options to be considered.

Focus on Interests not Positions

When dealing with problem issues, it is important to recognize the difference between interests and positions. Then, focus on the interests in order to find common ground and solve conflict.

A position on an issue is something you have decided upon and is how a stakeholder thinks the issue should be solved or addressed. A position can be viewed as the promotion of an action or policy to solve a problem. A position usually satisfies the interests of only one or a few individuals.

An interest is what causes someone to decide on his or her position. Interests reveal why one stakeholder disagrees with another on some aspect of an issue. Typically, disagreements stem from differences in feelings and thoughts about what each stakeholder wants and why. For each interest there can be a number of possible satisfactory positions. Many times however, people develop an immediate position on an issue and stick to it without considering all possible alternatives.

By uncovering the interests behind the positions, an alternative position may be found that meets the interests of many versus the interests of a few. A way to focus on the interests behind a position is to ask the question of why the position is held, or why a certain position is not supported. This helps to bring the underlying interests to the forefront. In the previous example of public sewage system, the question could be "Why don't you support public sewage in the municipality?" An answer of "I believe it will raise taxes" would show the interest behind the position and help create a dialogue to address it.

When stakeholders choose to focus on their interests rather than positions, they are less likely to see one another as losers or winners. Instead, they may see the commonality of their interests and work together to resolve the issue.

Cooperative Problem Solving

Cooperative problem solving encourages participants to focus on their mutual interests to work through complex issues. Cooperative problem solving is based on all participants receiving mutual gain rather than some winning and some losing. All sides make mutual gains by making sure that all groups' needs are satisfied at the lowest cost possible.

Cooperative problem solving means defining opponents as partners in the effort to find an agreeable solution to all participants. Cooperative problem solving can be encouraged by:
• keeping the group focused on the organization's goals;
• fostering listening to all sides of the issue;
• encouraging individuals to fully understand what participants want and why;
• asking for suggested solutions, not just problems; and
• emphasizing the benefits of agreeing and the consequences of not reaching an agreement.

The key to approaching conflict constructively is to recognize it as a process to be managed; unmanaged conflict is a threat to the survival of the group and tends to make the group less effective.

Dealing with Conflict

Conflict is a regular part of life and can arise from differences in values, beliefs and attitudes regarding issues. Local communities are constantly faced with issues, such as funding for education, land use changes, and tax increases, that have the potential of leading to conflict.

Conflict can be both positive and negative. Conflict allows people to look at a subject in different ways. This type of diversity can bring out the creative ideas and solutions. Negative aspects of conflict can involve frustration, confusion, and distrust. Avoiding conflict is not a solution. The key to approaching conflict constructively is to recognize it as a process to be managed; unmanaged conflict is a threat to the survival of the group and tends to make the group less effective.

A first step toward managing conflict is recognizing where it comes from. There are several types of conflict that can occur within groups.
• *Goal conflict*: differences in preferences or expected outcomes.
• *Task conflict*: differences in ideas or values between individuals. Group members may disagree about facts or opinions. The interpretation of evidence may be

questioned. Task conflict can be productive because it increases the number of perspectives considered and the level of critical thinking about the issue, which can improve the quality of decisions made by the group. It is essential, then, that all participants are encouraged to share their views, even if it might lead to conflict.

• *Procedural conflict*: differences about the steps toward accomplishing the goal. New procedures may be identified, and a new agenda suggested. Even the group goal may be changed. Procedural conflict, like task conflict, may be productive.

• *Affective conflict*: incompatible feelings and emotions between individuals. These types of confrontations can lead to high emotions and separation between group members.

Communication and dialogue help resolve conflict. It may be helpful to have a neutral facilitator to guide the discussion. A few suggestions to make the discussion productive:

• Be sure to involve all members in the discussion of the conflict so no one feels left out.

• Encourage accurate and fair communication practices. Recognize inaccuracies and provide clear information.

• All participants should listen and raise questions.

• The discussion should focus on the issues, not the people.

• When needed, reframe the conflict to focus on a problem that can be solved together. For example, ask for advice ("What would you suggest we do?") or ask for reasons for a position ("You must have good reason for thinking that's a fair solution; I'd like to hear why."). When reframing, your questions should begin with "how," "why," "why not," "what," or "who."

Finally, once a solution is agreed upon, be sure to make the changes, reinforce those changes, and confirm with all participants that things are resolved.

Step 7: Identify Evaluation Criteria and Decide On Next Steps

Success leads to more success so it is essential to create benchmarks to track progress toward goals. Small, initial successes point to what can be achieved by the group and boost motivation for future efforts. Celebrate these successes, and remind participants of the role they played in getting to that point. Re-evaluate your action steps in light of accomplishments.

Evaluation criteria should include not only the group's ultimate goals, but also the experiences of participants. Has the group been able to attract members, and have these members' experiences been positive? What have they learned in the process, and have they been able to use these new skills in other arenas? Having this information will allow you to tell a complete story of your success to participants and to potential funding organizations.

When the group has achieved the goal, what will it do? Will it continue but work in new directions, re-group and address new challenges, or disband? It is essential that participants know when their task has been accomplished, and that it is acceptable to move on to other projects and commitments.

Step 8: Maintain Open Lines of Communication

On-going, regular communication about your group and your group's issues is important. It can keep your issue fresh in the minds of the community, raise awareness about the group and improve the group's credibility. Following are several ways to maintain open lines of communication with the public.

Newsletters

One of the basic ways to keep in touch is the old standby, a newsletter. The problem with newsletters is that nearly every organization produces one so it may not stand out.

Newsletters can be expensive. Someone has to create the newsletter on a regular schedule, print it and mail it or post it to a website. At smaller organizations, this might be done by one person, with others pitching in at folding-and-mailing time. Larger organizations might turn the effort over to a public relations department. Regardless of how it is done, and despite the fact that there are lots of newsletters out there competing for attention, experts still suggest that you produce one.

For smaller organizations, a quarterly newsletter is probably enough as a monthly newsletter might be too much. In general, it's better to have a newsletter that arrives regularly and less often than one that is released more often but with no set schedule.

Effective newsletters are short, colorful and easy to read. Stories should be short and use simple language (6th or 7th grade level). Use shorter words, shorter sentences and avoid jargon and acronyms. Simple language will help your organization introduce itself to potential volunteers. No one wants to work with a group whose newsletter is indecipherable. If you have a message that must be sent by newsletter and must be long, break it into separate chunks or place only the critical parts in the newsletter and post the rest on your website. Put a note in the story directing readers there. If you can't afford color, then use the next best thing: lots of white space. Professional publishers use open space to make the newsletter look bright, light, and easy to read.

Special Activities

Sometimes something a little out of the ordinary can get the attention of otherwise distracted residents. These events offer the chance for residents to learn about their community and the resources and organizations within it. Special activities can inform people and get their atten-

tion about community issues. For example, one municipality sponsors a "Night Out for Public Safety," and it is mandatory for elected officials in that municipality to attend to circulate and talk with residents.

If You Have the Money

For larger organizations with resources, printing an annual "consumer guide" to the issues you're concerned about can be a good way of educating the public, keeping your membership informed and recruiting new members. Such a guide should be sent not only to interested people, but also elected officials and news media. This builds your credibility with elected officials and news media and encourages them to contact you for information about your issue.

The guide could contain many other ideas suggested here, such as a talent bank application and a form for people to volunteer or join your organization. And of course, be sure to devote resources to design, print and mail an attractive guide.

The printed guide could also provide information about your website. Today, many organizations are printing less and putting more on their websites. Which option works best for your organization is something that you should decide after talking with your residents or members.

Staying in Touch with the Public Via the News Media

If you want to have consistent news coverage, you need to have a plan and processes in place – a Media Management Plan (MMP). A Media Management Plan is a written document that summarizes how your organization handles relations with the news media. It assigns roles to people, establishes processes for what happens during a media contact and provides guidance for getting the best coverage. Just like any other long-term undertaking, planning now will pay off later. If you don't have a plan, your media relations will be chaotic and sporadic and you will lose much of your effectiveness.

The main parts of a Media Management Plan are:
1. an organizational chart identifying individuals and their responsibilities;
2. how-to information on handling routine media inquiries and requests (the news media calling you for information or you calling the media for coverage); and
3. how-to information on writing a news release or advisory to get the word out about what you are doing.

The MMP needs to be revisited every year to evaluate its effectiveness and tweak it based on lessons learned.

Contact person: Ideally, one person in your organization should be responsible for carrying out your MMP. Reporters are like everyone else: they're busy and they can't keep

If your organization is small or volunteer-run, you should still have a point person for news media contact.

everything in their heads. So they like to have one contact person at an organization. That contact person is the one they call if they want to get information from the organization. If the contact person does not have the information that the reporter wants, or if he/she is not the best person to provide the information, then the contact person refers the reporter to the right person.

This job is often given to the person in charge of public relations. Don't make the mistake of assigning the job to someone who is already too busy or who has no knowledge of the news media. The contact person must understand how the news media work: points of view, deadlines, newsroom hierarchy and other such topics.

The contact person should also be frequently available so the reporter can get in touch when needed. Nothing drives a reporter crazy faster than when a designated contact person is never available. Ideally, the contact person will trust a reporter with a home phone number, cell phone number, and email address. The potential inconvenience of a late-night or dinnertime call is offset by the importance of being available to reporters. If your organization is unavailable to comment on a story or defend itself, the reporter will turn to another source – and having another organization speak for your organization can lead to many problems. This works in reverse, too. If you find a reporter at a news organization that you like and trust, make him or her your contact person for the news organization. Have your contact person call him or her when you have a question or need to know where to send your news release or news advisory. Build a relationship.

If your organization is small or volunteer-run, you should still have a point person for news media contact. Often in smaller organizations, this will be a person in an involved, leadership role such as a chairperson or director.

Official spokesperson: Some organizations like to control information more than others. If you want greater control over the information that flows out of your organization and to the news media, designate someone as the organization's official spokesperson. Everyone in the organization, including the contact person, should understand that only the official spokesperson talks to the news media. Even the contact person is prohibited from giving out information. All the contact person does in this case is direct the reporter to the right place.

Often the official spokesperson is an executive director or vice president, but it could be any experienced, knowledgeable and readily available person in your organization. Even in small organizations, it makes sense to have one

person speak for the organization. It ensures a consistent message getting out to the public and minimizes the chances that a joking comment will be widely disseminated and misunderstood, putting your organization in a bad light. This position is particularly important if there is a crisis, as a member of your organization who is untrained in media relations might feel threatened by news media attention if something negative is being reported about your organization. A defensive, or worse, counter-attacking comment rarely results in positive public perception.

News release coordinator: This person handles outgoing news releases and tracks their progress. The news release coordinator does not necessarily write the news release, but might do the proper formatting and printing. Who writes the release is up to each organization, but usually it is best if the person most knowledgeable about the topic writes the release. In smaller organizations, it is entirely possible that one or two people will share all three of these roles: spokesperson, contact and news release coordinator. The number and training level of your organization's members will determine the best arrangement for your organization.

News releases: A well-written news release is much more likely to be published or made into a story. Here are a few tips for making news releases interesting and publishable.

• Have a "hook" – something interesting or unusual and timely. Put that in the first paragraph. If you don't have a hook, don't expect coverage. Organization anniversaries, new personnel, conferences, receiving grants and new partnerships are all good hooks.

• Spelling and editing count toward your credibility. Get them right every time.

- Have the name, title, phone number and email of the contact person on the news release.

• Keep it to one page. If it runs longer, cut unnecessary information until it fits onto one page. Keep your writing tight, brief, factual. Any sentence over about 15 words should be chopped into two or more sentences. One thought per sentence; one idea per paragraph.

• Provide all the facts: Who, what, when, where, why, how much, who cares? Think about who will care the most about your information and write the release to appeal to that audience. In any case, write your release to be easily understandable by an average sixth-grade student. Use summaries and simplifications on complex topics.

• Fax it or mail it to the newsroom. Call one day later to find out its fate.

General pointers for using the news media for communication.

• Put your Media Management Plan in writing, at least in outline form. Update it once a year, such as at a regular annual meeting or conference. When people leave or depart the organization, you might have to reassign roles.

• Everyone in the organization should be familiar with the Media Management Plan and have access to a copy in printed or electronic form.

• Each organization has to make its own decisions about how to encourage (or enforce) the writing of news releases on a regular basis (monthly or quarterly.)

• For routine, regular events, such as open houses, the duty of writing the news release can be rotated or assigned to one person.

Periodic Review

No matter what communication processes you use, you should review them periodically. Audits and surveys might show that your most expensive communication method (say, an annual printed directory) is also your least effective. Could that money be better spent elsewhere? One organization contacted for this guide surveys its members to see what they are reading, how often and how much time is spent on each communication piece. Those channels with high costs and minimal member attention are revised or discarded. For example, a newsletter that is not read when it arrives via the mail could be put online and a postcard mailed to remind members when the content changes. Or the printed newsletter could be changed to an email version.

CONCLUSION

A more engaged citizenry can lead to better organizational decisions, more efficient resource allocation, reduced conflict, and enhanced quality of life for community residents.

However, getting all the pieces in place to get citizens involved and make their experiences positive can be daunting, take considerable time and resources, and involve significant organizational risk.

The suggestions and ideas included in this guide provide a starting point for you and your organization in enhancing your citizen engagement efforts.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

General Resources

Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, Virginia Tech University. *Partnerships and Participation in Planning.* http://www.uap.vt.edu/cdrom/default.htm.

University of Kansas Community Tool Box: http://ctb.ku.edu/.

Penn State Cooperative Extension. *Learning Today, Leading Tomorrow.* http://leadership.psu.edu/Curriculum.html.

Surveys and Key Contact Interviews

Needs Assessment Techniques (Key Informant Interviews), University of Illinois Extension: http://ppa.aces.uiuc.edu/KeyInform.htm.

University of Kansas Community Tool Box: http://ctb.ku.edu/tools/en/sub_section_main_1047.htm.

UCLA Center for Health and Policy Research course materials for community needs assessments: http://www.healthpolicy.ucla.edu/HealthData/tw_cba.html.

University of Vermont Extension and Center for Rural Studies. *Community Needs Assessment: An Introduction to the Needs Assessment Survey.* 1991. (not online, but see: http://crs.uvm.edu/citizens/index.htm).

Carter, K.A. and L.J. Beaulieu. 1992. *Conducting a Community Needs Assessment: Primary Data Collection Techniques.* Gainsville, FL: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/HE/HE06000.pdf.

Other examples of interview guides: http://www.asthma.umich.edu/media/eval_autogen/key_informant.pdf (asthma-related organizational experiences, outcomes, impacts); and http://www.epi.umn.edu/react/pdf_files/Leadership_Survey.pdf (community leadership and decision-making).

Delphi Technique

Carter, K.A. and L.J. Beaulieu. 1992. *Conducting a Community Needs Assessment: Primary Data Collection Techniques.* Gainsville, FL: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/HE/HE06000.pdf.

Focus Groups

Krueger, R, A., and M. A. Casey. 2000. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Public Issues Forums

National Issues Forums Institute and the Kettering Foundation: http://www.nifi.org/index.aspx.

Viewpoint Learning: http://viewpointlearning.com/index.shtml.

Public Agenda's Citizen ChoiceWork™Dialogue Sessions: http://www.publicagenda.org/pubengage/pe_citizen_choicework.cfm

Charrettes

National Charrette Institute: http://www.charretteinstitute.org/

National Endowment of the Arts, Your Town Design Workshops: http://www.yourtowndesign.org/

Citizens Panels

The Jefferson Center: http://www.jefferson-center.org

Study Circles

Study Circles Resource Center: http://www.studycircles.org

Working with Consultants

Graham, S. 2003. *Working With Consultants: Lessons From The Field*. Community Resource Center, Denver, CO.

http://www.denverfoundation.org/images/

CRCWorking_With_Consultants.pdf#search=%22working%20with%20consultants%22.

University of Nevada Cooperative Extension Community Leadership Guide:

http://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/EBPubs/EB0103/volunteermgmt10.htm.

Southern New England Nonprofit Consultant Directory: http://www.sneconsultant.org/resources.asp.

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