



Promoting Effective Public Participation at Governing Body Meetings:

Opportunities to Deepen Public Participation and Trust

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Meetings: Checklist for Before, During
and After

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This publication offers suggestions for improving the process of successfully receiving public input, at regular local agency meetings. Key goals are to make this input most useful to decision makers, and more satisfying to participating residents themselves.

When local officials think about engaging the public, many think about face-to-face, and/or electronic ways to provide residents with opportunities to make their views known.

Regular public agency meetings, such as governing body or planning commission meetings, typically represent the bulk of local agency public meeting activity. Such meetings offer a good opportunity to increase public understanding and engagement relating to the issues decision-makers are grappling. At times, local officials

are disappointed these meetings are attended by only a handful of regular participants, who may not represent the full range of constituent perspective.

What tools and strategies are available to decision-makers to help maximize the scope and value of resident input at public meetings? The answers fall into three categories:

- **Who Attends?** Does the range of perspectives decision-makers reflect the full range of perspectives in the community? Is the public input *inclusive*?
- **What People Know?** Do those presenting their views have sufficient information about the issues facing decision-makers to provide useful input? Is the public input *informed*?
- **Public Trust and Confidence in Decision-makers.** Do communications at the meeting result in greater understanding of, and support for, the decisions that are made? Does the process enhance the community's faith and trust in those making the decisions?

Expanding the Range of Views and Ideas at the Meeting

Striving for more extensive public participation at governing body meetings can give decision-makers a fuller sense of community sentiment, and surface ideas for addressing issues that decision-makers and staff may not have considered.

Creating ways for decision-makers to hear a broader range of community sentiments can result in more enduring support for the decisions or policies that the body makes.

Before the Meeting

The following ideas can help expand participation in the public input process at governing body meetings.

- **Start Early.** Reaching more people will typically require significantly more time than legally required minimum notice periods.
- **Use Community Intermediaries.** For groups which may have an interest in a topic, but little experience in such participation, provide meeting information through trusted intermediaries on how to prepare and participate in the public meeting process. Such intermediaries can include neighborhood groups, civic organizations, clergy and congregations, business groups and other community based organizations.
- **Use Local and Ethnic Media.** Publicize meetings through multiple media outlets, including those media reaching populations and communities typically less involved; such as ethnic minorities, and youth. Translate notices and other information into the languages used by the community's residents.
- **Take Advantage of Online Communications.** Include notice on the agency's website, social media outlets and other places easily available to online users. Try to "crowd source" or encourage others to pass the information along.
- **Explain Why People Should Attend.** Distribute informational materials prior to the meeting, which explain what will be discussed at the meeting and why it matters to residents.
- **Provide Details.** This includes the meeting time and location, as well as from where interested individuals can find more information about the issues at stake in the meeting. See also ideas under "informed participation," (on page 4).

Purposes of Public Meetings

Regular public meetings have a number of purposes, including:

- **Decision-making:** Such meetings are where the local agency's decision-makers gather to grapple with the issues facing the agency and the community it serves, usually to make decisions on those issues.
- **Public input and transparency:** Such meetings are also a key vehicle through which these decision-makers receive input from those affected by those decisions and also allow the public to see how a decision was made.

At the Meeting

- **Consider a “Workshop” Format.** A number of agencies will have pre-meeting workshops that are less formal than the regular meeting format. Such workshops typically offer both decision-makers and the community the opportunity to engage in joint learning and information exchange about a topic. Variations on the theme are to have the workshop occur at a separate time from the regularly scheduled meeting, or in lieu of the regularly scheduled meeting.
- **Create a Participant-Friendly Meeting Place.** Offer food, paper, pencils and optional name tags to underscore the agency’s respect for participants.
- **Create the Opportunity for Hallway Information.** Before the meeting, allow proponents of the agenda project(s) on the agenda to set-up in the hallway outside the meeting place, with displays and materials explaining the proposed project. This gives the proponent at the table a chance to answer questions from those who will be participating in the meeting, as well as have back and forth conversations with residents. This may produce more information being given to participants before the meeting. The human-to- human contact may lessen vitriol in the meeting itself.
- **Consider a New Room Set-up.** If consistent with meeting room layout and/or any security concerns, consider changing the physical setting of the meeting room to reduce feelings of distance between public officials and participants. This can underscore the message that public input is welcome.
- **Make Translation Services Available.** Explain how participants can take advantage of any available translation services at the meeting. (Note: The Institute has such equipment available to loan to local agencies interested in trying such technology out. For more information, call 916.658.8208).
- **Be Disabilities Conscious.** Be prepared for the needs of those with disabilities.

Typical “Regular” Meeting Formats

A typical item on a governing body meeting agenda will often involve:

- A staff report
- Questions of the staff from the decision-making body
- An opportunity for public comment on the item
- A vote on the issue before the governing body for decision.

In quasi-judicial matters, the process will also involve:

- The opening of the public hearing
- A statement by the project/policy proponent or applicant
- Statements in support and opposition
- Rebuttals and closing statements

Under some circumstances, the process will yield a need for further information. If time permits, the decision may be delayed to enable staff or others to secure this additional information.

- **Encourage Non-Technical Language.** Avoid technical language, and when technical terms are used, explain what jargon and acronyms mean. This allows those new to the issue an equal opportunity to follow and contribute to the discussion.
- **Consider Mechanisms for Anonymous Input.** Instant polling technology equipment allows participants to share their preferences without having to stand up and make what they might consider a speech. (The Institute has such equipment available to loan to local agencies interested in trying such technology out. For more information, call 916.658.8208.)
- **Invite All Voices to Contribute.** Toward the end of an agenda item, ask if others are present who have not yet spoken, but would like to do so.

Informed Participation

Governing body members will receive more useful public input if the public has more information about the issues to be decided by the governing body. In addition, different ways of structuring the discussion can provide decision-makers with more information about participants' views.

- **Use Multiple Communications Channels.** Make background information available to local media and community based organization information channels early on. Take advantage of the agency's website and social media channels to make information available. Encourage people to pass along the information.
- **Use Graphics.** Endeavor to explain issues graphically. Use graphs, maps, models, info graphics and such to accommodate different learning styles and aid understanding.
- **"Layer" Information.** Present information in layers to enable those who do not have time to receive top level summaries of the issue(s), while those who have more time and interest can go deeper into more detailed information.
- **Have Documents On-site.** When possible, have on hand relevant explanatory materials, including those developed by impartial sources.
- **Provide Roadmaps for Input.** Materials at the meeting, and the presiding official, can offer guidance on how participants can effectively present their concerns, views and values. This

Types of Decisions

Governing bodies act in multiple capacities that affect meeting formats and flexibility:

- Decision-making processes for **legislative** decisions--such as updating general plan--are more flexible.
- Decision-making processes for **"quasi-judicial"** matters--when the agency is applying general policies to specific facts or a permit application--are more constrained.

As the name suggests, in quasi-judicial hearings, the public agency decision-makers are assuming a more judge-like role. Rules relating to fair process and fact-finding apply.

Local agency officials and staff should consult with their agency's attorney to determine the extent to which new approaches to public input can be accommodated in any given situation.

For more information about quasi-judicial decision-making, see www.ca-ilg.org/bias.

can encourage participants to express not only positions, but the values and concerns that underlie those views. (*Please see sidebar below*)

- **Provide Opportunities for the Public to Get Answers to Questions.** Consider providing opportunities for the public to ask questions about the issues. Online formats can work well for some segments of the community; other formats may be helpful for other segments of the community. It may be desirable to answer even those questions that can't be answered (either because of time constraints or the need to do further research) during a meeting.
- **Invest in Additional Preparation Time.** Both the meeting chair and staff should be clear on the issues on which the agency is inviting input, and how to frame the discussion accordingly. Explaining the procedures being used for the meeting is helpful, including the processes for public input.
- **Staff Presentation on the Issues/Timing of Staff Recommendation.** Public trust and confidence in the professionalism of staff will be deepened if staff presents information clearly and neutrally, including the pros and cons of various alternatives available. If time permits, it may be helpful to hold off on making the usual staff recommendation until another meeting, so that the recommendation can take into account the concerns and perspectives expressed by the public
- **Try a Themed Conversation.** While it is typical and wise to have consistent time limits for speakers, consider asking participants to stick with one theme or thread of the discussion at a time to enhance information sharing and reduce duplication of points made.

Values and Local Agency Decisions

Governing body meetings can sometimes magnify the tension between different points of view within the community about how the community's interests will be best served. For example, many conventional decision-making forums push the discussion of public issues to positional points of good/bad and yes/no. How can public officials counteract the contentious and divisive nature of the public meeting process and encourage participants to engage in a more constructive analysis and discussion?

One way is to encourage participants to focus on the core values at stake in a decision. Examples of core values include fairness, community, economic prosperity, compassion, responsibility, and environmental stewardship. Most public policy dilemmas involve tensions between at least two values.

Whatever values come into play and no matter what they are called, recognizing them will help people understand their differences. It will also help them talk more clearly and constructively about what they want. Greater clarity, understanding and respect regarding agreements and differences usually result.

Promoting Public Trust and Confidence in Decision-makers and the Decision-Making Process

Public decisions often involve hard choices, trade-offs on issues and values that community members care deeply about. Acknowledging and describing these difficult trade-offs and choices promotes greater understanding among diverse perspectives.

In addition, public trust is eroded if meetings appear to be just “going through the motions.” An ideal result of any public meeting is that participants believe decision-makers have respectfully heard and will carefully consider their perspectives, whatever the final decision.

Process Tips for Challenging Meetings

- **Be Clear from the Beginning.** A helpful strategy is for presiding officials to clearly explain the purpose of the meeting, as well as emphasize the key questions, choices and/or values that underlie the proposed action or policy.
- **Underscore the Agency’s Commitment to Civility.** The chair may also want to acknowledge that reasonable and well-intended individuals can disagree about what is best in a given situation. Encouraging people to “disagree without being disagreeable,” and adhering to other principles of respect and civility, may reduce the likelihood that anyone will come away from the meeting feeling disrespected. For more information on encouraging civility in public meetings, see www.ca-ilg.org/civility.
- **Explain the Purpose of Time Limits.** When many attend a meeting to share their views, time limits enable everyone to be heard within the space of a reasonable meeting length. The underlying values are both fairness (including applying time limits in an evenhanded manner) and respect for the audience’s time.
- **Ask Questions; Clarify.** Build in time for officials to ask follow up and clarifying questions. The goal of such questions is not to argue with those who have differing views or to point out information that they may not have been aware of but to let them know that their views are being heard and considered. Such questions can be an way to encourage speakers to 1) clarify their comments 2) go beyond vague or general statements 3) explain their reasons and values underlying those reasons and 4) acknowledge trade-offs.
- **Practice Active Listening.** Thank participants after they finish their remarks, and perhaps summarize what has been heard from each speaker (this can be done verbally or see the following suggestion on having a recorder).

Informational Assistance Available from the Institute

The Institute encourages local agency officials to take advantage of its various informational offerings on its website. Most of these are available through the “Local Government 101” section of the website (www.ca-ilg.org/local-government-101).

For example, the Institute offers “one-pagers” that explain in plain language common land use decision issues, see www.ca-ilg.org/onepagers. These can be linked to from agency websites, attached to meeting notices and made available at meetings.

- **Consider Having a Recorder.** Try using flip charts or other recording mechanisms to summarize points as they are made; this creates a visual record that the agency is hearing the perspectives being offered. If that individual has facilitation skills, consider whether it is appropriate to have them ask follow-up questions that drill down to more specifics or the consideration of hard choices.
- **Use Values to Clarify Trade-offs.** In addition to improving communication, generally a discussion of the respective, and (at times) competing values associated with different public actions or policy directions, can help clarify and validate the real trade-offs that may be at issue. *(Please see sidebar on values and local agency decisions on page 5.)*

Linking Input to the Decision

- **Explain Use of Public Input.** The presiding official's introductory remarks should describe how local officials will use the information and ideas offered at the meeting.
- **Decision-maker Clarity.** Each public official present should have a common understanding of the purpose of the public meeting, the timing of decision-making and how the decision will be communicated.
- **Explain Decisions Clearly.** Strive for decisions that are clear, consistent with applicable legal standards and broadly disseminated. Where appropriate, help explain a decision in light of the value(s) that the decision represents, as a way to further illuminate the reasons for its adoption.
- **Make the Discussion Available.** Many agencies web or telecast meetings to expand the number of people informed about the issue, the difficult trade-offs involved and the importance of informed public involvement in the decision-making process.
- **Offer Further Information.** Another strategy for connecting with the public is to ask participants if they want to receive follow-up information on the meeting topic, either by mail or e-mail, as it becomes available, including opportunities for further input.
- **Express Appreciation.** An ideal approach, if resources permit, is to send emails or letters of appreciation to participants with information on any official decisions made subsequent to emphasizing the importance of their meeting participation.

Dealing with Emotions and Other Difficult Meeting Situations

The Institute offers a number of resources on dealing with emotions in public meeting. These can be found at: www.ca-ilg.org/DifficultSituations

Other Good Practices

- **Have a Communications Strategy that Spans the Before/During and After of the Meeting.** Who is the audience for announcements and outreach? How will the agency ensure inclusive communications during the session? Afterwards, how will the agency going to transmit the process and results of the meeting to the community as a whole? For more information, see Strategic Communications in Public Engagement at www.ca-ilg.org/PEStrategicCommunications.
- **Provide Multiple Opportunities for Involvement.** For very contentious issues, it may be helpful to design a broader and more interactive public process that precedes the public meeting. Meetings that occur late in the decision-making process can create the (mistaken) impression that local officials do not want meaningful public input. Possible approaches for public engagement include community dialogues, consensus building sessions, charrettes and other collaborative planning processes, visioning workshops, and more. The best specific approach depends on the issue in contention, desired goal(s) of the process, community context, and available resources. For more information on options, please see the ILG website www.ca-ilg.org/publichearings.
- **Consider a Facilitator.** Consider the use of a facilitator, who is not a member of the public body convening the meeting, to help design group process and manage the meeting. This is especially important if an interactive meeting component is designed to encourage dialogue among attendees, or between officials and the public. (As with some other ideas presented here, this would more likely be appropriate at quasi-legislative governing body meetings where some flexibility of format is possible.)

This resource is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. (www.ca-ilg.org/publicmeetings).

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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