

# Dealing with Deeply Held Concerns and other Challenges to Public Engagement Processes

## Public Engagement Challenges

Differences of opinion about land use plans, budgets, employee pensions, public safety, sustainability, transportation options, affordable housing and other topics can trigger strong concerns and emotions held by community residents and groups. At times, local agencies and officials may themselves be the main topic of heated public discussions.

Public engagement processes are often forums for a broad spectrum of input. In some cases, public engagement participants will have very strongly held views about:

- The topics to be discussed;
- The local (or regional) agency and officials involved; and/or
- The public engagement process itself.

Such deeply held concerns can present challenges to a local agency sponsoring or organizing a public engagement process. It is important to make sure that these concerns are addressed effectively, to ensure the opportunity for all perspectives to be heard.

Designing and facilitating a discussion among people who have significantly different perspectives and deep feelings about an issue is both a skill and an art. The following ideas can help in designing and preparing for public engagement processes that are effective, responsive and civil - even when participants hold very strong views. Of course, local and regional agency public engagement plans and responses will be contingent on the time, staff and financial resources available.

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## Know Your Likely Participants

As part of the public engagement planning process, try to anticipate and understand:

- Participants' likely concerns and interests.
- Gaps in the information they are likely to have about the topic of discussion.

It is helpful to know your public engagement participants and their views. Organized stakeholders and interest groups tend to hold strong views, while members of the public may have more varied opinions. To better understand the viewpoints of your audience:

- Talk with colleagues at other local and regional agencies to better understand what challenges and strong public sentiments surfaced during their public engagement activities. Ask which engagement-related approaches worked and which did not.
- Consider the range of goals participants have in attending the public engagement meeting. Some participants will welcome opportunities for dialogue and deliberation with their neighbors. Others may primarily want the opportunity to: 1) ask questions; 2) make their views known; and/or 3) raise objections to the public engagement or planning process itself.

## Plan, Prepare and Provide Information

Meetings that involve individuals and groups with very different and deeply held perspectives on the issues, on the role of government, and on public engagement itself, require careful planning. It is helpful to:

- Meet with groups and organizations likely to have strongly held views early in the design process. This may help to better understand views and concerns and to solicit input on process design that will enable all participants to be heard. In some cases, forming a public engagement advisory committee may be helpful.
- Plan and hold selected public engagement activities in partnership with groups and organizations that have earned the community's respect.
- Demonstrate a commitment to seeking public views by offering opportunities for early input into the matters under consideration.
- Try to ensure that participants adequately reflect the diverse population and viewpoints of the affected community.

- Be especially clear in all communications about public engagement meeting purposes and processes, as well as about when, how and by whom final decisions will be made.
- If possible, provide appropriate background information to participants before and during the meeting to help prepare for informed participation.
- Identify and use impartial meeting facilitators and leaders who will not have, or be perceived as having, a bias. This may encourage greater trust in the process and broader participation.
- When using speakers to introduce issues and provide perspectives on topics present a broad spectrum of views.
- Prepare staff and facilitators to be comfortable with strongly expressed opinions and confrontational behavior. Provide staff and facilitators with possible options and responses if participants challenge meeting ground rules, processes and/or content. Facilitators should be courteous even if challenged and flexible as circumstances require.
- If concerns arise about potential safety and security issues at a meeting, staff and facilitators should know who will make decisions about any agenda changes or whether a participant should be asked to leave. Bear in mind that the in some cases, visible presence of law enforcement personnel may discourage full participation or further escalate tensions.

## Design an Appropriate Process

Various public engagement process designs support and/or allow opportunities for different kinds of public input. Some meeting design elements are particularly important when issues are significantly controversial and contested. Consider the following ideas:

- Design processes that attempt to meet the reasonable participation needs of those likely to attend. This may include: agendas that include time for questions and answers, individual comments, small group discussion and collective discussions. However, be *very realistic* about the time you need if you pursue such multi-faceted approaches. Sometimes separate and/or serial public engagement activities may be called for. In some cases, an earlier meeting that allows for more individual comments, questions and answers, can be followed by a meeting (or meetings) with opportunities for more collective scenario discussions and planning.
- If your goal is to try to find common ground across very deeply held and strongly felt differences, the process or processes you choose must be designed for that purpose. Typically, this will require: buy-in from key stakeholders about the process and its purpose; well thought out and accepted ground rules; competent and trusted facilitation; attention to relationship building among participants; and multiple meetings with opportunities for frank dialogue and deliberation. It is also important to include participants who reflect the views of the greater community.

- Frame and publicize the *purpose* of the public engagement meeting/activity in a way that clarifies your goals, the information you plan to share, and the sort of public knowledge you are seeking.
- Allow enough time in the agenda to explain what will be accomplished during the current meeting, and to present an overview of the decision-making process, individual roles and responsibilities and how public input will be incorporated.
- Present issues and scenarios to be discussed in ways that acknowledge underlying policy history and assumptions.
- Be careful of presenting a closed set of predetermined scenarios or choices to participants. It is generally best, to give participants the opportunity to identify other options or to express a “none of the above” preference. If the scenarios presented are the result of previous public engagement efforts, make that clear.
- Provide sources and background information when presenting data and other information to the public so people can verify it for themselves.
- At times, it can be useful to start with a less controversial topic or a more do-able piece of work and then move into more difficult and controversial issues. This may increase the public’s confidence in the process and commitment to address the larger issues.
- Consider including options for online input and discussion in the overall public engagement strategy. This allows additional choices for participation and may help secure a broader range of perspectives from the community.
- Create participant worksheets that allow meeting attendees to offer more detailed individual comments and ideas.
- If the agenda includes an opportunity for public comment and a large number of participants are expected, consider limiting the comment time allowed for each individual so that all can be heard. In some cases, key questions may be identified in small groups and then asked in the larger group.
- Determine how any collected comments, discussion elements or recommendations will be recorded and documented and where and when they will be available.

## Transparency in Public Engagement

At the public engagement meeting be clear about ground rules and each activity's purpose. Maintain a respectful, impartial and firm tone and manner. Stay flexible to meet unexpected challenges. Consider the following ideas:

- Early in the meeting, briefly describe the overall agency decision-making process, the various opportunities for public input, the goal of the meeting and how the input will be used. This should include the roles and responsibilities for ultimate decision-making, implementation and/or action by the local or regional agencies involved.
- Explain, as appropriate, the roles of others at the meeting including: local or other public officials or agency staff, presenters, facilitators, media, etc.
- Describe the meeting ground rules and the values and behaviors they are intended to promote (such as respect and fairness). Ask participants to agree to observe the ground rules. If someone objects or refuses to agree, ask if the rest of the group agrees. If there is substantial objection or confusion, further discussion may be required. If one or two people out of a large group raise concerns, these should also be addressed. However, if no closure can be achieved in a few minutes, state that the ground rules accepted by most meeting attendees will be in effect and all are asked to follow them. It will then be the meeting organizers' responsibility to determine which, if any, ground rule "violations" that occur need to be identified; this may result in someone being asked to leave.
- If participants will be asked to sign in or identify themselves before speaking, explain the purpose this serves for both speakers and listeners.
- For question or comment periods, indicate whether participants will be called upon directly or asked to submit question/comment cards. Some individuals may object to the use of comment cards, believing their contributions will not be as effective if they are grouped with others' or expressed by someone other than themselves.
- Acknowledge that there are likely to be disagreements. Encourage participants to practice active listening to ensure that people feel heard. Active listening techniques include repeating what one has heard, asking for clarification, avoiding the use of accusatory language and refraining from questioning someone's motives or integrity.

## Negative, Emotional or Challenging Comments

Some discussions may become loud and passionate. Rude or insulting comments may be made. Some participants may challenge the public engagement process or the overarching decision making process of the local agency. It is important to listen carefully, use good judgment and respond specifically to what is being said. For example:

- Encourage and practice active listening. Be respectful. Do not respond in kind to derogatory or insulting comments.
- Identify and respond to the substance of the question or comment rather than to its tone (assuming the question or comment is relevant to the topic).
- As appropriate, ask the person making a challenging comment to explain their point more fully. If a factual assertion is made, ask for the source of their information. Encourage everyone to draw connections between their comments and the policy issues at hand.
- If some of the participants object to moving from a large group format to small group discussions, you may suggest that those who wish to do so should move to the small group discussions. A facilitator or staff member can work with those remaining to construct a process that will meet their needs.
- Intervene if personal verbal attacks are made by one participant to another. Refer back to the ground rules and ask that such comments not be made or repeated. If a meeting leader or facilitator is individually verbally attacked, they should not respond in kind but should refer to the ground rules. Ask the speaker to reframe the question or comment in a way that focuses on the policy issues at hand.
- Suggest a short break and, as appropriate, speak to an individual about his or her inappropriate language or interactions with others.
- Be aware that people who do not feel heard are likely to speak loudest. Some individuals also use more direct or emotional styles of verbal and nonverbal expression than others.
- To the degree that's realistic, try to steer the conversation away from terms that may mean very different things to different people, such as "sustainability," "liberty," "property rights" or "economic justice."

## Dealing with Disruptive Behavior

While rare, if one or more participants' behavior become continually and personally insulting or disruptive, it is important to acknowledge and address it appropriately. If this behavior is not addressed, the meeting may deteriorate and the chances of accomplishing the meeting's purpose will decrease. Clearly establish in advance which individuals are responsible for taking such action, and communicate this to meeting sponsors, leaders and facilitators.

If insults, disruptive behavior, or challenges to the meeting continue to occur, consider the following ideas:

- Review and enforce the meeting ground rules.
- Have the meeting facilitator maintain control of the microphone(s).
- In some cases, ask the group whether they wish the meeting to continue as planned or move to another format or process. However, this can be difficult and usually unwise in an already polarized or increasingly out-of-control meeting.
- If a “back-up” engagement process has been planned, move to it if appropriate and explain to participants what will happen next.
- If some participants continue to shout, talk over others, or disrupt the meeting:
  - Indicate that they will be asked to leave if the disorderly behavior continues; and take that step if called for; and/or
  - Conclude the meeting.

### About the Institute for Local Government

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