

Meaningful Input to Public Policy: Citizen Participation Strategies

Part three of six



In the 1960s and '70s, many federal grants mandated public participation in planning and community redevelopment programs. More recently, federal monies have been reduced, but the demand for citizen involvement has continued as a strong force in local policy making.

This publication deals with the flow of information between public officials and the public. It examines the flow of information from the public to decision makers, as stakeholders provide input into policy-making processes. The strengths and weaknesses of alternative public participation techniques are discussed, together with suggestions for managing the process to ensure meaningful and controlled stakeholder input.

What is Citizen Participation?

Local officials rely on citizen input to stay informed about public concerns as well as to gain insight into citizen preferences. When the flow of information is from the electorate to the decision maker, citizen participation is occurring.

There are many examples of citizen participation in everyday life. It may be informal communication with local leaders at church, voting in local elections, supporting organizations that represent particular views, or sending e-mail to local officials.

When well-organized, citizens and interest groups can have a powerful influence on the outcome of decisions. Access to information and electronic communication are making citizens more effective in getting their views across. While some view this as troublemaking, others hail a reawakening of civic involvement. Whatever the view, skillfully managing citizen participation in the decision-making process is necessary to progress.

About this Series

Public issues are matters of widespread concern in the community. They are resolved by group decision processes that create local public policy. We often assume the responsibility for resolving public issues is in the domain of government. But as society becomes more complex, and we acknowledge the limits of what government can achieve, we recognize the need for public and private interests to work together. Involving diverse interests in public issues, however, can often heighten local conflict and make the resolution of community issues more difficult.

Keeping on Track, a series of publications for local officials and community leaders, deals with managing controversial public policy. The issues vary, but all too often the problem is the same. Whether it's corporate farming, school bond issues, or new development proposals, communities often get bogged down in controversy, and nothing seems to get done. This series of publications presents strategies local leaders can use to navigate the minefield of controversial public policy so the community can resolve the issue and keep moving forward.

Goals of Citizen Participation

Citizen participation helps achieve outcomes beneficial to local decision making. Not all of the outcomes are necessarily for high-minded purposes. Most reasons for implementing a citizen participation program can be classified as relating to one or more of six general goals:



- to further democratic values by ensuring the interests of the majority of citizens are at the forefront of local government decision-making;
- to achieve planning that is more attuned to the needs of different groups by recognizing diversity within the local community;
- to educate the nonparticipating public by reaching out to them;
- to bring about social change by enacting policy that ensures equal access to services and opportunities across the spectrum of the local population;
- to recruit support, obtain legitimacy, and avoid opposition by including citizen groups and stakeholders in some aspects of the decision-making process; and
- to promote a particular perspective or bring about change in the political order by informing like-minded citizens of opportunities for involvement.

Identifying the Goal of a Citizen Participation Program

The six general goals provide a broad sense of what a citizen participation program can accomplish. However, a given citizen participation program cannot, and should not, attempt to achieve all goals. Different techniques are better at achieving some purposes than others. Thus, building a strategy related to the use of a citizen participation program begins by identifying what it is intended to accomplish in relation to a particular issue. There are a number of questions that need to be answered at the start:

- Is the participation intended to generate ideas?
- Is it intended to help identify attitudes?
- Will it be useful in expanding the community's base of knowledge about an issue?
- Can it help resolve a conflict that is impacting the community?
- Is it intended to measure public opinion?
- Will it be used to review an existing proposal?
- Will it be used as a sounding board for local decision makers?
- Will the involvement be advisory or have some binding impact on local decision making?
- How will those involved know when they have completed their task?

Developing a Citizen Participation Strategy

To create an effective citizen participation process, it is important to decide several issues at the start.

The first consideration is the nature of the issue for which citizen participation is being sought. The stakes are greater for some issues than others. This will influence the scope and extent of the citizen participation strategy. Where emotions run high, where potential impacts are substantial, or where the number of interests are large, a more extensive effort will be required.

Local decision makers need to clearly identify what citizen input is needed and desired. Is the objective to mold a new strategy, to respond to an issue, or react to a proposed solution? Is it for the purpose of learning the preferences of affected citizens, or to meet the requirements for decision making? Being honest and clear about what type of input is necessary and sufficient will forestall generating unrealistic expectations and the potential ill-will that results.

The strategy must be specific about who in the community constitutes the "affected" public. This will help determine the effort required for outreach. It may be input is only sought from those concerned enough to identify themselves. What about groups traditionally underrepresented in decision making, who often bear the brunt of negative impacts?

Of course, anyone dealing with the realities of political life recognizes the need to assess the power relationships at work. An amount of deference must be conceded to those in a position to force their will or create repercussions for decision makers. This does not necessarily mean the most powerful should automatically win or even unduly influence the outcome, but such recognition acknowledges the need to implement strategies to minimize potential negative implications.

More specifically, a determination should be made about what point in the decision-making process the input will be most useful. Obviously, to invest heavily in crafting detailed plans only to have them "shot down" is a waste of time and resources. It may be preferable to invite input earlier in crafting a proposal more sensitive to potential citizen objections.

Acknowledge the need for resources at the start. If an issue is controversial, an information meeting followed by a public hearing may be insufficient. In such a case, an extensive public education program may be needed before soliciting citizen input. Citizen participation methods could provide opportunities to help forge compromise solutions.

Finally, it is imperative to be explicit about what citizen input is needed, how the information will be used, and when the process is over. Unrealistic expectations are easily generated when citizen input is solicited. Some will believe solicited input will have decision-making authority, only leading to anger and disillusionment if this is not the case.

Matching Citizen Participation Method to Purpose

Once the goals of the citizen-participation program have been established and the desired citizen input identified, the methods are selected. Choice of method should directly reflect the type of information needed and the purpose to which it will be used. Following are common purposes for which citizen input is sought and the methods generally effective in achieving the task.

To gain ideas and input from the public ...

Community meeting/public hearing: an open gathering of people from the community who wish to be heard about a topic or issue. A public hearing is often formal, with statements going into an official record of the meeting. A community meeting will often be an informal gathering where people come to share ideas with local officials. Two-way discussion is generally kept to a minimum to give citizens the chance to speak.

Focus groups: a small gathering of stakeholders who meet in a confidential setting to discuss an issue or react to a proposal. These meetings are often facilitated by a trained individual. Participants are typically asked to respond to open-ended questions intended to initiate a discussion among the group. The assumption is that through discussion, new information will emerge that would not otherwise come to light from individual questioning. Sometimes local officials sponsoring the focus group will actively participate in the discussion and other times only observe.

To complete a specific task with citizen input ...

Workshop: a meeting focused on a predetermined task to be accomplished. Primary stakeholders are often involved because of a high level of interest in the issue. To be most effective in addressing a public issue, the full range of interests should be represented in the workshop. Rather than soliciting general opinion, workshops are intended to focus on specific concerns and produce a predetermined product. The benefit of such meetings is that those most directly affected by an issue are directly involved in addressing it.

Task force: a small (usually 8 to 20 people) ad hoc citizen committee to complete a clearly defined task in the planning process. A task force is often appointed to study a particular issue and offer a report of findings and recommendations to the policy-making body. They will often function under a deadline.

To have a discussion about citizen priorities associated with community projects ...

Priority-setting committee: citizen group appointed to advise local officials regarding citizen ideas and concerns in planning community projects. Participants would be trusted to represent the concerns of citizens and sometimes function as a “go-between” with residents and the local government.

To discuss citizen priorities associated with community projects ...

Policy Delphi: a technique for developing and expressing the views of a panel of citizens chosen for their knowledge about an issue. The objective is to work toward a consensus of opinion that can be used by policy-makers for decision making. Successive rounds of presented arguments and counterpoints move the group toward consensus, or at least to clearly established positions and supporting arguments.

To quickly and quietly ascertain public sentiment about an issue ...

Interviews, polls, and surveys: a potentially less threatening means to provide a chance for citizens to speak directly with someone about their views. Detailed information can be gathered. While confidential, the information can be informative both in content and overall emotional/political reaction to an issue. To be valid and representative, this method generally requires a trained survey-taker to maintain confidentiality and statistical reliability.

To gain input about the alternatives and consequences of an issue ...

Media-based issue balloting: coupled with a media-based effort to discuss alternatives and consequences of potential solutions, citizens are asked to respond through the local media. Letters to the editor or radio call-in shows are monitored to gain a sense of public reaction. Unscientific and not a reliable indicator of overall community sentiment, it can be a good way to gain a quick reaction to proposals by those most likely to be active on an issue.

To give citizens broad decision-making powers ...

Citizen advisory boards or councils: appointed representatives of one or more community interests. An advisory board studies an issue and makes recommendations to policy makers. The range of decision-making authority can vary and, in some cases, may be binding.

Referenda: direct and binding decision-making authority by the electorate. For highly controversial issues or where uncertainty exists about the overall sentiment of the community, decision makers sometimes leave it to the voters to decide. Protracted campaigning leading to a referendum can become a divisive force.

To stay informed about the needs of certain neighborhoods or interest groups ...

Group or neighborhood planning council: organized by the citizens themselves, this council serves as advisory to policy makers. Such councils keep decision makers informed about neighborhood or group concerns, formulate goals and priorities on behalf of the neighborhood or group, and evaluate plans and programs affecting the neighborhood or group.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Citizen Participation

In assessing a citizen participation exercise or program, both content and process are important. Both what

Citizen Participation Goals and Methods

Quick Reference Guide

Goals:

1. To gain ideas and input from the public
2. To complete a specific task with citizen input
3. To create a dialogue about citizen preferences
4. To quickly and quietly ascertain public sentiment
5. To gain citizen input about alternatives and consequences of a proposal
6. To give citizens wide decision-making powers
7. To stay informed about the needs of certain neighborhoods or interest groups

Methods:

- A. Community meeting
- B. Focus group
- C. Workshop
- D. Task force
- E. Priority-setting committee
- F. Policy delphi
- G. Interviews, polls, surveys
- H. Referendum
- I. Media-based issue balloting
- J. Citizen advisory boards
- K. Neighborhood planning council

Goals	Methods										
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
1	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓				
2		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
3		✓			✓	✓					
4						✓	✓				✓
5	✓	✓			✓				✓		
6								✓		✓	
7							✓				✓

was achieved and how it was achieved are equally valid dimensions to consider. In addition, there are usually important interactions where the quality of one dimension affects the quality of the other. Taking an assertive, yet thoughtful approach to the use of citizen participation can bring new and useful information to light and enliven civic involvement.

In evaluating the content of a citizen participation program, the key question is how useful and practical the output from the process was to decision making. Did the input help decision makers make more thoughtful and enlightened policy? Were citizen recommendations feasible? Would decision makers invite citizen input into future policy debates?

In evaluating the process, the focus shifts to the participants. Did everyone potentially affected have the opportunity to be heard? Would participants describe the decision making as open and fair? Would participants be willing to do it again?

The interaction between content and process can also be a powerful force toward the implementation of the new policy. People who feel involved and responsible are more likely to be committed to seeing a new policy in place and working. New relationships in the community are forged, leading to important interactions between community leaders and organizations.

Conclusion

A key element to the resolution of any public issue is the capacity to solicit meaningful information regarding constituent and interest-group preferences. In this publication, a number of ideas about how to gather input from the community have been presented.

In addition to the ability to communicate effectively, other elements to resolving public controversies include demonstrating leadership capacity and the ability to resolve conflicts and disputes. These topics are included in the other editions of this series.

This is one in a series of publications dealing with the issue of managing controversial public policy. The entire series includes:

- Leadership in the Public Arena
- Informing the Public Debate: Public Education Strategies
- Meaningful Input to Public Policy: Citizen Participation Strategies
- The Public Relations of Public Policy
- Successful Negotiating Skills
- Resolving Multiparty Disputes

Individually or together, these resources are intended to help local officials and others develop greater leadership capacity.

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