



DEPARTMENT OF LOCAL AFFAIRS OFFICE OF SMART GROWTH

HOW TO ENCOURAGE CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT

Local governments need to do much more than meet the legal requirement for public hearings in order to successfully gain public participation and support for their planning policies and regulations. How do you get citizen participation? The following list includes some ideas.

Tips for Involving the Public

- Providing food is a great way to attract people; try hosting a community picnic with free hotdogs, ice cream socials, pizza parties. These are great opportunities for appointed and elected officials to talk with the public in a comfortable atmosphere.
- Community surveys and photo surveys (e.g., visual preference survey)
- Provide child care at meetings to make it easier for young families to attend
- Community open house to kick-off process
- Neighborhood meetings
- Keep an updated recorded message on one phone line to inform citizens of upcoming meetings and events
- Develop a citizen planning academy
- Present to community groups and clubs; bring ideas of how they can participate
- Use print, radio or TV media if helpful and appropriate for your events and meetings. Cultivate relationships with the media based on trust and respect.
- Work with your newspaper to develop a page devoted to local/regional planning meetings, hearings, activities, etc.
- Consider a special annual community event hosted by the planning commission, such as a highway cleanup or a picnic
- Include pertinent information regarding civic involvement in the welcome materials for newcomers (e.g., meeting schedule, important community events, list of boards and commissions)
- Topic “teams” or subcommittees, steering committees, etc.

- Have draft plans or regulations available for comment at the jurisdiction's administrative office, the library, on-line if possible, via the newspaper (summary), local coffee shop or similar meeting place
- Newspaper advertising, using non-technical language, with invitation to meeting and to provide comments via mail, e-mail, or phone
- Personal, confidential interviews (appropriate in certain circumstances)
- Small group community goals brainstorming
- "Citizen draft" or temporary citizen committees for input on a project
- Hold a visioning or "Futures" conference and invite stakeholders to identify mutual interests, build a shared vision, and set goals
- Partner with local teachers – present an activity in a classroom or build a project with a teacher regarding a current or future planning project
- Develop a web site with up to date information on planning projects, meetings, hearings and events. Have the plan or summary of the plan and the regulations available on-line if possible. Include an email address for public comments.

Make your meetings more accessible, more enjoyable, and less intimidating to the public, to increase attendance:

- Regularly provide an agenda at the door, along with a brief explanation of how the meeting will proceed and when and how citizens can comment. If possible, make copies of pertinent documents available.
- Restrict storytelling and consider ending meetings before it gets too late (and continuing on another date, if necessary). A reasonable time limit for public comment helps keep meetings from stalling or going on forever. Citizens may be more willing to attend meetings if they know it won't take all night.
- Listen. Show citizens you have heard them by responding directly to what they have said.
- Build and maintain public trust by holding professional, civil meetings. Avoid calling special meetings, and make an extra effort to be clear about actions, motions, etc.
- If possible, hold meetings and hearings at times that are convenient to the public. Hold meetings at different times, occasionally, so as not to exclude some members of your community (e.g., those who work nights)
- Consider arranging your meeting/hearing room so that the public can see what is presented by staff, applicants, and others. While it is important for the applicant, for example, to address the board and not the audience, there may be ways to structure the room or use audio-visual equipment so that the audience or public can see the maps or other visual aids which become central to the discussion.