Expanding Local Voices...

Participation & Planning (Part 1)

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A few years ago, I listened to a candidates debate for a local jurisdiction. One of the candidates was asked a question about public participation. The candidate, a long time member of the local board, looked perplexed. After a few seconds, he looked out at the audience and asked "why should we?"

Public participation is often viewed with a certain amount of ambivalence, especially by elected officials and staff. If you poll the elected officials in your jurisdiction, you are likely to find that most, if not all, believe that the act of voting is the only necessary form of participation. People elect the representatives they believe are going to act in their best interests, and the public should step back and let them do their jobs.

Inviting the public into the process of governance is seen both as a political necessity and a political threat, especially in jurisdictions which have relied on tightly-controlled or highly concentrated power structures or where the same people or the same groups have been running the town or the county since time out of memory. While laying a foundation won't solve all of the potential problems or help you avoid all of the potential pitfalls, it will help to get everyone involved on the same page.

Why are we doing this?

Before you start your project, whether revising a plan, developing a new ordinance, or creating a neighborhood plan, you need to determine three things:

1. Why are you including public participation in the process?
2. How much participation do you want to include?
3. What type or types of public participation suit your needs?

If you answer the first question with "because state law requires it," you have already defeated your process. Citizens know when elected officials or staff do not want them involved, and if there is a growing awareness of the distance between citizens and their elected officials, it will play out at the ballot box. Before you start a project, really think about how you want citizens involved and why. What are you trying to accomplish by bringing them into the process? While there are no right or wrong answers, per se, there are some things to think about as you are determining your reasons for public involvement:

Diffusing Opposition: Building citizen involvement in the decision or planning process generally will lower community friction over an issue. For example, say you want to develop a plan for a trail/walkway network in your community. While you would like to build the entire system in public right-of-ways, the reality is that portions of the system will need to cross private property along rear lot lines. Using an open approach to the development of the plan gives you a way of educating citizens on the project while involving them in the decision-making process. Because of this, you are less likely to have citizens, en-masse, say "not in our neighborhoods" and more likely to

have broad support for the project, an important feature when it comes to financing the project. A public participation process won't solve all of the issues involved in a project, but it will help guarantee that both the direct and indirect stakeholders will at least hear you out.

Creating a Bigger Toolbox. Local planners will often tell you that some of the best ideas come not from planners or consultants but from the citizens, those folks who are on the ground and deal with the results of a problem on a routine and regular basis. An open public participation process that includes problem identification and solution activities will draw out citizen ideas. Even if their suggestions are unworkable, they may lead to a solution that is.

Generating Community Investment. While citizen participation will not guarantee that all citizens will be equally invested in the future of their community; not including citizen participation will most certainly guarantee they won't. Citizen investment translates not only into greater political support for the project, but also into higher levels of citizen volunteerism both at the community level and at the neighborhood level. Communities, whether large cities or small villages or rural counties, depend not only on financial investment in the form of taxes, but more importantly on emotional, social, and cultural investments to achieve the goals set out in documents like the comprehensive plan. In short, community involvement creates community and sustains community.

Tapping into Diversity. Public participation can be an iffy business. Most planners can recount experiences where a public meeting was held and nobody came . Successful participation programs often require extraordinary public outreach and citizen education prior to the meetings,. You may have to go beyond the traditional means of public outreach (listservs, newspaper articles, public notices). This is especially true if you are trying to bring those most often left out into the process. A well designed public participation program will help you reach beyond the small percentage of the population invested in planning to those communities often ignored, including minority and disadvantaged communities who may be most impacted by the consequences of planning and development.

Asking the Right Questions

The success of your public participation process depends in large part on the questions you ask and the questions you are trying to answer. Before you design your process, determine what you need to know. This is not the same thing as predetermining the responses. Your questions need to focus on filling in the blanks in your knowledge or understanding of "place" past, present, and future. During the beginning of the process, stay away from questions that have closed or guided responses and questions that focus on current conditions (citizen satisfaction surveys, for example, measure residents' level of comfort with current conditions and services, but tell you little about how they see the community or what they envision for the future).

The most common set of questions originate from a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) or a variation on the theme. The language of the questions may vary (What do you like? vs. What are the strengths?), but the general intent is the same.

Your questions will also differ based on what you are trying to achieve. If, for example, you are working on a plan to redevelop a specific area, you questions will

likely center on what needs to be preserved (what is treasured?), what needs to be changed; and what will or should the area become?

Levels of Participation

The level of participation depends, in large part, on what you are trying to achieve, on the nature of the project, on the level of political control, timing, and staffing. Small, localized projects like a village plan or a neighborhood plan do not require the same level of participation as a comprehensive plan, nor do they require the same number of meetings.

Nature of the project: To determine the level of participation, start by defining the purpose and the breadth of the project. If your project is fairly narrow in scope (i.e. widening a section of road between two neighborhoods, redeveloping a neighborhood park, or reconfiguring an intersection), you may choose to use a smaller scale or targeted approach, such as a establishing a citizen advisory committee (CAC) or a steering committee populated by stakeholders. Larger projects, especially those that are community wide like comprehensive plans, will require using multiple approaches, including surveys, community meetings, or community visioning workshops, as well as steering or advisory committees.

Political Will and Power Sharing. As always, politics is the 800 pound gorilla in the planning process. If you are working with or residing in a jurisdiction where power is entrenched or closely held, convincing the elected board or council to relinquish control may be an uphill battle. In this, citizens often have the upper-hand in convincing their elected officials to change course, especially in election years. Planners, however, do not have the luxury of using politics to fight politics. They do, however, have education. A friend, and a long time planner, used to say that you should walk into meetings with elected officials with a minimum of three plans: The moon (the ideal plan with all of the bells and whistles), the sky (shortened ideal plan with some of the bells and whistles), and the closest and largest hill (the plan you can live with). How far you get in your journey depends on how well you educate your ground crew.

Timing. When you assess the project, be realistic about time frames, especially if you are doing the project in-house. If you have the luxury of time, which is generally not the case, add two months to your estimated length. If you are under a deadline imposed either by state code provisions or by your local board, you can either scale back you process (probably not the best choice), choose different approaches to public participation, or rethink the process so that you maintain public participation but condense other areas of the process. For example, rather than holding public input sessions, go the workshop path and ask citizens to help write the plan.

Staffing. Staffing, more than politics, is the most important factor in determining your approach to public participation and the depth of community interaction. Public participation is time intensive, often requiring your staff to put in extra hours preparing meeting materials, conducting the meeting, and analyzing results, in addition to the other tasks assigned to them. As a rule of thumb, set aside a minimum of two full business days for each public input session.
    If you use a survey, set aside a minimum of three days of staff time per one

hundred surveys. Even a one page survey can take six to 10 minutes to code, especially if you include open ended questions that require you spend time translating bad handwriting. Keep in mind that while quantitative surveys (closed-ended questions) are easier and faster to code, they provide less information than surveys that include at least some open-ended questions.

Whatever type of project you are tackling, large or small, build in enough time for staff to actually be able to do their work without developing ulcers. (See Carol Lindstrom's article on developing surveys in this issue).

Short staffing and time constraints are the best arguments for appointing a steering committee to not only help oversee the project, but to also pitch in and help.

Identifying Stakeholders

Presumably everybody in your jurisdiction is a stakeholder and in an ideal world everyone would get involved. The reality, however, is that ten or fifteen percent participation is often considered extraordinary and, too often, wide swaths of the population are left under-represented. In planning, developing an inclusive list of stakeholders should always be one of the first steps for large, long term projects.

Stakeholders fall into three categories: direct, direct but silent, and indirect. Direct stakeholders are those who are directly affected by a plan or a decision: landowners, developers, realtors, contractors, farmers, ranchers, historic preservation proponents, environmentalists, business people, organizations, and so forth. Generally, they are going to be the folks you include on your list without really thinking about.

The 100 Names Exercise

This exercise comes from a Freshman English exercise. Freshman typically choose obvious research topics: the first five or ten topics that come to their mind. While the topics may have merit, they are generally on everyone's list. To get students to move beyond the obvious, ask them to come up with a list of 100 topics they think might be interesting. When they bring in their lists, ask them to ignore the first 20 and pick from the remaining 80.

The 100 Names exercise is much the same, with one notable variation, the top 20 are not removed from consideration. Sit down with a piece of paper and write down 100 names or groups that you think might be interested in an issue or impacted by an issue. The first 50 may be easy enough to come up with (direct stakeholders); the second 50 will be a challenge (direct but silent stakeholders). Once you have your list, split your list into four groups:

High Benefit/ Low Impact	High Benefit/ High Impact
Low Benefit/ Low Impact	Low Benefit/ High Impact

The names included under the low benefit/low impact list can be safely left off of you stakeholder list. Your list, however, should include representatives from the three other areas. One final note: benefit can be either tangible (monetary gain or increase in property values) or intangible (reduction in crime rate).

"Direct but silent" stakeholders are the folks who will be affected by the plan, but who do not always come to mind when you create your initial list: renters, residents in mobile home parks or retirement facilities, children, and, all too often minority or economically challenged citizens.

Not all stakeholders are directly affected by a decision, but may either be indirectly affected or may indirectly represent someone who is affected.

For example, say you are in a jurisdiction that is considering allowing mobile homes only in the agricultural areas or in organized mobile home parks that meet specific standards. You sit down to write a stakeholder list. Your initial list will likely include mobile home companies, mobile home park owners, housing specialists, neighborhood or park associations, and so on. They are often the most obvious groups. The general population or potential mobile home owners are much harder to identify, especially in terms of selecting potential representatives for a focus group.

One way of determining direct but silent stakeholders and indirect stakeholders is to identify common points of intersection with the broader community. For example, if the majority of mobile home parks in your jurisdiction are marketed towards "seasonal seniors," possible stakeholders might include a representative from the local office on aging, members of the local chapter of AARP, or other organizations that provide services to the senior population.

Choosing the Type or Types of Public Participation

Public participation methods fall into three categories: targeted group, general public, and individual. With larger projects, like comprehensive plans, it is not unusual to have public participation models that choose one from column A (targeted group), one from column B (general group approach), and one from column C (individual approach).

Targeted group approaches, as the name implies, target specific groups or individual stakeholders to participate in a group setting. Approaches include steering committees, citizen advisory committees, focus groups, and community facilitators.

Steering Committees. Of the four targeted group approaches, steering committees carry the most weight in terms of actual authority and are the most hands-on. Typically, steering committees are directly appointed by the local elected authority, with one or more members serving on the committee. Membership varies based on the size of the jurisdiction and the size of the project, although committees typically have between 11 and 19 members. In addition, committees can include staff members from the local government (administration, planning, parks and recreation, schools, and so forth), local stakeholder organizations (Chamber of Commerce, Farm Bureau, Home Builders or Realtors' Association, environmental groups, historic preservation groups, etc.), and individual experts. In planning, it is not unusual to see steering committees tasked with both the development of the local plan and the implementation of the plan once it has been adopted. Steering committees often have the authority to establish the specific process, set deadlines, assign tasks, and oversee the quality, scale, and timeliness of work, as well as taking lead roles in the individual parts of the process.

Citizen Advisory Councils or Committees (CACs). As the name implies, Citizen Advisory Committees are made up of citizen volunteers, generally from targeted stakeholder groups, who function in an advisory capacity only.

While members of CACs may be more than willing to pitch in, the CAC does not generally have the authority given to steering committees. In addition, they may include members from other advisory boards (planning, parks and recreation, library, etc.) and they generally have some staff support, but they rarely have staff members or elected officials as voting members of the board.

Focus Groups. Focus groups are far more limited in scope and duration and are used to garner public input, to provide feedback on existing programs or plans, or provide recommendations centered on a specific question or subject. They may meet only once or a few times, but the activity is limited both in terms of scope and duration.

Community Facilitators. Community facilitators are designated members of local organizations who provide a connection between the project principals and the community (either geographic or of interest) they represent. Unlike the other three, the community facilitator approach uses "self-selecting" or "targeted" community volunteers to act as facilitators for either a general group approach or an individual approach. It is not unusual for the community facilitators to become an unofficial "ad hoc" citizens' advisory committee as the planning process progresses. (See the article on community facilitators in this issue).

General Public Approaches

Most public participation processes incorporate the "general public approach," although the meetings themselves may go in far different directions depending on the choice of form and activity: workshops, charrettes, and so on. Rather than targeting specific populations or groups, general public participation meetings are open to everybody within a given neighborhood, jurisdiction, or region and are quintessential open government. You may end up with the same participants you would have had using a targeted approach, but the decision to participate, or not, is the individual's rather than the government's.

While targeted approaches establish a hierarchy of knowledge, preferencing certain individuals or groups over others and over the general population; general public approaches assume that everyone who participates brings to the meeting an equal level of interest and expertise, regardless of their background in community planning.

There are a couple of caveats about using general group approaches. First, unlike the targeted approach, which are less prone to the problems associated with dominant speakers, general group approaches can dissolve into something akin to meeting chaos if the conversations are dominated by one or two individuals. While dominant speakers are not necessarily a major problem with large gatherings, they can be very disruptive in somewhat smaller settings. One way of getting around the problem of the dominant speaker is to use small group activities during the course of the meeting. The dominant speaker may still attempt to be the center of attention within the small group, but will not have a disruptive impact on the overall meeting.

Second, make sure you have sufficient volunteers on hand to help with the process. Trying to run a general public or community meeting by yourself may mean that you will be stretched thin. You can draw from members of your planning commission, citizen advisory committee, or steering committee for ground support. It is a good idea, however, to have a short training session with the "help," so they understand their roles in the meeting. If you have members who tend to dominate or who have a difficult time stepping back and not guiding discussions, you may want to assign them other tasks.

Individual Approaches.

   Individual approaches engage people on an individual level rather than in a group setting. Until the advent of the internet, blogs, wikis, and social media, individual approaches were essentially limited to surveys conducted at the beginning of the process and targeted stakeholder or citizen interviews, That is no longer the case.

   Surveys. Surveys are still used, but the opportunities for individual input have mushroomed, extending throughout the process. In the pre-internet days, the survey was sent out, collected, and analyzed; the public input sessions were held; the plan was drafted; and final copies were dropped off at local libraries for citizen perusal prior to the public hearing. There was a lag of six months or more between the time citizens had a say and when they saw the final product. Garnering public comment during the drafting and revision processes could be done, but it was expensive. The use of focus groups and advisory committees helped to mitigate the cost and the isolation in which the plan was typically written.

   The internet has had a profound effect on individual participation in the planning process. Not only has it broadened opportunities for participation during the survey and public input phases, it has also made it possible to decrease the isolation surrounding the research and drafting processes. Websites and blog sites can be used to post the results of surveys and input sessions, background reports and data, and perhaps, most importantly, draft chapters without breaking the public bank.

   Programs like SurveyMonkey, reviewed later in this issue, can be used to publish parts of the plan and invite public comment. Wikis can be used to garner public input and interaction with future land use maps. Facebook and Twitter can be used to announce public gatherings or the posting of new documents. As the internet and social media evolve, so will the methods used for individual participation.

    This said, there are some potential limitations and practical problems created by the new technologies. Not the least of the problems is that it is much more difficult to limit participation to citizens only and to control the tone of the discussion. If a document or a survey is published online, it is available to anyone, inside or outside of your jurisdiction. To guard against duplicate surveys, add in a section at the beginning of the survey for an identifying question (email address, water bill account number, and so forth). You can make the information optional, but most people will fill in the blank.

   Programs like SiteMeter and Google Analytics (both of which are free) will track the location of respondents. Both tools require adding specific code to your webpage which allows the programs to track everyone who accesses you site. If your jurisdiction has an IT person, ask them if there is a tracking program already installed on the site. If not, ask them add one to your project pages. Site tracking programs also allow you to flag "problem" respondents and track what citizens are viewing (which will help you gauge the level of interest in specific subjects).

   Interviews, stakeholder and otherwise: Stakeholder interviews are an excellent way of gaining first hand/first person knowledge of a place and augment information. The most obvious interviews (realtors, developers, large land owners, local museum curator, local newspaper editor, elected officials, etc.) may not, however, provide you with the most in-depth information.

Look beyond the obvious list. For example, if you want to understand the impact of poverty in a community, go talk to some of the elementary teachers, school principals, or local ministers--people who have to deal with the consequences of poverty on a regular basis. If you want to understand the fabric of the community, go talk to the local grocery store checkout person, a local waitress, or a local bartender--people who have random conversations about a broad range of topics throughout the day. If you want to understand the vagaries of the local road network, go find a couple of mail carriers. The point here is that different individuals experience the community in significantly different ways. Someone who drives a mail route on a daily basis is going to have a far different understanding of the road conditions than someone who occasionally uses the same road as a convenient cut-through.

There are a couple of different things you need to think about before starting an interview process. First, come up with a set list of questions. Asking each of the interviewees the same questions will provide you with a range of answers, which will allow you to compare how different people view an issue. For example, developers and homeowners are likely to have very different takes on what is important in a thriving neighborhood. The types of questions, of course, will vary, depending on your project and should be general rather than specific. If you ask follow-up questions, make sure you note the question and the answer as "additional information."

Second, make sure you have a broad enough list of stakeholders to actually provide a balanced view of an issue. Interview projects fail when there is an imbalance in the stakeholders (too many stakeholders from one side of the issue and not enough from the other side). The stakeholder identification method you use for identifying stakeholders for other parts of your public input process, should be used to identify potential interviewees.

Finally, stakeholder interviews can take anywhere from 20 minutes to 40 minutes and often require setting up interviews for set times and dates. If you decide to use stakeholder interviews, start them very early in the input process. In order to satisfy documentation requirements, ask the interviewee if you may record the interview. While some respondents will wish to remain anonymous, most will agree to the taping.

Blogs. Using a blog to garnering online comments for draft documents allows you to get more immediate feedback on drafts without spending money on printing. In addition, the blog allows for conversations not only between you and the respondents, but also between respondents. Unfortunately, it also creates a number of problems, not the least of which is the time necessary to moderate the online conversation. While you can set a blog to allow unmoderated comments, it is not wise, especially in this age of spam. If you are using a blog, you need to set aside daily moderation time. (Karen Drake's article on blogs in this issue).

Facebook. Facebook is terrific for getting announcements and information out to residents (a bit like an electronic bulletin board), for garnering limited input, and for encouraging beginning conversations, especially with younger residents. However, it also has some significant drawbacks. Participation is limited to those with access, an important point if you consider the impact of the digital divide, and to those who have a fairly high comfort level with technology. Response length is limited, which encourage users to "short-hand" their responses, understandable to only those who are able to translate. Nuance is out, as are lengthy and detailed responses. The same is true, or more so, for Twitter.

A second, and perhaps larger, problem with the different forms of social media has to do with document retention. Not only can you not retain documents; you are unlikely to be able to keep up with the conversations as they shift from the official site to other locations. Technically, even conversations on Facebook or Twitter are part of the public record, but retaining that part of the record requires additional back flips. If you use Facebook, set aside part of each day to check the site, copy the page or pages, including all of the comments, and paste them into a text document. Twitter is far more problematic.

Documenting Results

Regardless of which approach or approaches you use, remember that everything generated during the public input process, from Facebook comments to scribbles on flip-charts are part of the public record and need to be retained. Take the time to set up your files well before you start the process and set aside a file folder for each separate meeting. If you want to cut down on the time it takes you to find information in the folders, create a one page summary sheet that includes the date of the event, the list of participants, and a short description of the file contents and tape it to the front of the file. It will save you some time when you get the inevitable FOIA request.