

Unique circumstances often surround projects and initiatives your organization has established. Selecting an appropriate public involvement process will help you actively listen to your stakeholders and thereby aid you in formulating responsive action plans. A combination of techniques may be used to recognize community issues related to your projects or initiatives.

PE TIP SHEET NO. 18:

Listening to Your Stakeholders

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“I know that you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.” This quote from author Robert McCloskey characterizes the importance of the quality of communication in public involvement. Make a sincere effort to listen to and understand community concerns and to make every attempt possible to develop a creative solution that is acceptable to the community while meeting the objectives of your organization. This effort will be rewarded when your stakeholders become true partners with your organization.

Use one of more of the following techniques to reach out to your constituents. Pros and cons of each technique are offered to assist you in choosing the most beneficial one or ones to apply to your bridge-building efforts.

Meeting With Community Groups

Usually, there are several community groups most concerned about a particular project or initiative. Your organization can identify and focus on specific concerns by meeting separately with each group.

During the meeting, your organization explains the project, answers questions, and receives input. The time, place, audience, speakers(s) and agenda should reflect a carefully developed plan for achieving your goals in the public involvement process, and should ideally be developed with a key member of the community group.

Before the meeting is scheduled, extensive discussion should take place between the planning staff, consultants, and others involved with the project or initiative and all those who represent your organization externally. Be sure to include your public information officer and/or your government relations staff and top managers as well. Opposition and support can come from unexpected quarters and every attempt should be made in advance to minimize the likelihood of surprises. It is important that your organization and its consultants be receptive to the public and its suggestions at these community meetings. Further, it is essential that all visual aids portray a project accurately. See Tip Sheet No. 14, *Credibility Matters*, for helpful hints to use during public workshops to build your and your organization's image.

Pros

- ◆ Meetings with community groups respond to the needs of each group and are more tailored than general public workshops.

Cons

- ◆ The community groups may be suspicious if your organization meets with them separately. Use clear and open communication between all groups to avoid this situation.

Meeting With Key individuals

Many of the same concepts that apply to meetings with key community groups apply to meetings with key individuals. Make sure to identify *ALL* key individuals and offer each the chance to meet with your organization. Forgetting to invite a single key individual may vilify them and the group they speak for.

Pros

- ◆ Meetings with individuals avoid potentially volatile group settings.
- ◆ Meetings with key individuals allow your organization to focus on issues of mutual concern.

Cons

- ◆ Participants do not have the benefit of hearing the concerns of other members of the community.
- ◆ Individuals may be suspicious if your organization will not meet with them as a group. Use clear and open communication to explain how meetings on the project will proceed.

Public Workshops

Public workshops are meetings that the public is invited to attend. Announcements are usually made through direct mailings, newspaper announcements, posters, or invitations. Single as well as multiple workshops can be held, such as a single scoping meeting, or a series of workshops on a series of separate topics. Minutes may be taken and mailed out to participants or a facilitator using graphics can record the meetings while the meeting is in progress. If possible, recorders should be neutral parties. Tip Sheet No. 12, *Utilizing Community Forums to Deliver Your Message*, will help you prepare for a workshop.

Pros

- ◆ Workshops are open to the entire community, providing wide access to the public.
- ◆ Workshop can be tightly structured to focus attention on specific issues.

Cons

- ◆ Public workshops can create situations where speakers attempt to impress the audience rather than provide input to your organization. Structuring the workshop using an alternative method such as an Open House can provide for successful exchange of information for all attendees.
- ◆ It is more difficult to focus on a particular group's concerns in a public workshop setting. Use note cards and a "question" box at the meeting to allow more individuals an opportunity to have their questions answered. Provide workshop participants with contact information for any additional questions.
- ◆ Members of the public may not be willing or able to attend more than one meeting. Further, they may become frustrated if your organization limits discussion to selected topics at particular meetings. Information about each meeting can be posted on a project Internet site. Create a mailing list and distribute summaries of each meeting, or information at key project milestones.

Citizen Advisory Committee or Community Task Force

A Citizens Advisory Committee or Community Task Force can allow your organization to work with a group of representatives from the community over time and develop understanding and trust. These groups can be formed around a particular project or initiative, or they can convene regularly to provide ongoing comment and feedback to your organization. See Tip Sheet No. 16, *Consensus Building*, to help you maximize the value of Advisory Committees and Task Forces.

Pros

- ◆ Ongoing committees can be useful for establishing continuing rapport with important community representatives.
- ◆ Members of a specially convened task force can develop expertise on a particular subject.
- ◆ Having a task force in place can simplify the process of establishing or reestablishing communication with the community.

Cons

- ◆ The committee or task force may not be truly representative of the community. Avoid this by gathering information from key stakeholders regarding who should participate on the committee.
- ◆ Sometimes the committee or task force exceeds its delegated task. Be clear at the beginning of the process about the committee's role, and remind members throughout the life of the project.

Citizen Surveys

Citizen surveys are generally conducted by telephone, mail, or e-mail to research how community members view an issue or to gather data needed for a situational analysis.

Pros

- ◆ Citizen surveys can determine the views of the “silent community” rather than simply relying on input from community representatives.
- ◆ Surveys can develop factual data to support the situational analysis.
- ◆ Surveys can help identify trends in community thinking and potential issue areas.

Cons

- ◆ Surveys are viewed as impersonal because the degree of one-on-one communication is limited. Use this technique on combination with others that do provide direct communication.

Scoping Session

An Open House can be enjoyable, alternative way to hold a scoping session. An Open House uses informational boards placed around the meeting room. An informed person should be located at each station to answer questions. This enables people to go from station to station to learn about the project or initiative (e.g. program, intended uses of facility, site plan, schematic design, topics intended to be covered in an EIR, regulatory and permitting requirements, etc.).

Pros

- ◆ Enables people to focus on their areas of interest.

Cons

- ◆ People stationed at each information board may not be fully informed of all aspects of the project or initiative, and may answer questions inappropriately. Educate your staff prior to the scoping session, and provide instruction to refer unfamiliar questions to the project manager, or appropriate spokesperson, such as a project consultant.

A Good Listener Is A Silent Flatterer

An old Chinese proverb states, “To listen well, is as powerful a means of influence as to talk well, and is as essential to all true conversation.” By listening well to your constituents, you will understand their needs and perspectives and forge stronger bonds with those you need to collaborate with.

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