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## The Do's and Don'ts of Working with Local Communities: Tips for Successful Community-Based Public Meetings

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## The Do's and Don'ts of Working with Local Communities: Tips for Successful Community-Based Public Meetings

### Abstract

Communities must be provided with a forum to express residents' opinions on proposed public policies through effective community-based public meetings. Planning is essential to conducting an effective public meeting. To be successful, an effective public policy education process must be implemented before, during, and after the public meeting.

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## Introduction

Communities must be provided with a forum to express their opinions about public policies. Public meetings provide an excellent format for honest and open local input. Planning is essential to conducting an effective public meeting. An effective public policy education process must be implemented before, during, and after the public meeting.

## Before the Public Meeting

- Go into the community early, without a formal, already-established agenda. Let local officials help develop and be a part of a mutually developed agenda.
- Make early contact with key policy-makers and opinion leaders to assure their participation.
- Convene a small group meeting of local leaders in advance of any formal public meeting.
- Meet in their environment, such as a home or local restaurant.
- Seek local/community college or university linkages.
- Anticipate conflict ahead of time.
- Set up meeting at a time, place, and frequency agreeable to local conditions.
- Ask local leaders for length-of-meeting recommendations, including individual presentations. (2-hour meetings and 20-minute presentations recommended.)
- Organize and practice your presentations.
- Keep presentation focused and at a level most members of the community can understand.
- Use an experienced facilitator who is familiar with local conditions.
- Know when to use audio/visual equipment. Sometimes you are more effective simply talking to your audience.
- Bring whatever audio/visual equipment needed to the meeting. Don't rely on unverified equipment.

## During the Public Meeting

- Dress professionally for the occasion and appropriately to the local culture.

- Arrive at the meeting early to meet your local hosts, check out the room, and set up equipment and illustrations before attendees arrive.
- Greet, meet, and mix with the local people as they arrive.
- Speak to the audience at ground or floor level if possible; avoid elevated stage or platform.
- Always ask a local official everyone knows and respects to open the meeting, give the welcoming remarks, and make the initial introductions of state and/or federal agency guests.
- Introduce elected officials at the beginning of the meeting as a sign of respect.
- Attempt to make good eye contact with the audience.
- Speak clearly and slowly; however, be enthusiastic.
- Don't lean on or drum the lectern. Don't shuffle or speak monotonously during presentation; try to look relaxed.
- Use local geographically and socially familiar examples in presentations.
- Require all agency representatives to stay at the meeting and take part in the discussions.
- Avoid agency "hall meeting" and talking in the back of the room during the meeting.
- Make a conscious attempt to mix up seating so agency representatives do not sit together.
- If you can't tell a joke, don't try to be funny. Stay away from potentially distasteful jokes, comments, or observations.
- Have a printed outline of key points to be made at the meeting, and distribute it before the meeting begins.
- Use clear slides with a similar layout throughout the presentation(s). Each slide should illustrate a point.
- Don't apologize for lack of information. Simply point out that this is the information you have.
- If a slide cannot be read from the back of the room, don't use it.
- Avoid flow charts; maps, bullets, and checklists are preferred.
- Approach all issues in a positive manner; always take the "high road."
- Smile to make people more comfortable.
- Justify the issue by expounding economic, social, and quality of life benefits within the community that will result from the proposed action; however, be honest about potential benefits and costs.
- Anticipate reactions to certain policy points/issues. Prepare a concise question-and-answer handout for distribution.
- Create and distribute a handout listing your name, address, phone number, fax number, and e-mail address for participant follow-up. If possible, include the same for a trusted local contact working with you on the issue.
- Admit when you don't know something or are not certain.
- Discuss the strengths, weaknesses, and uncertainties about the issues or the proposal.
- Maintain your composure; avoid losing your temper.
- Read the audience; if members become restless or begin talking, cut back and adjust your presentation immediately.
- Make it clear to the audience that the information flow should go both ways; local input on the issue is critical.
- Leave quality time for public comment and questions.
- In some communities, you may want to avoid some "hot button" words such as "activist," "environmentalist," or "preservationist." Replace with more acceptable words such as "conservationist."
- Record issues of concern brought up during the meeting on a flip chart in the front of the room.

## **After the Public Meeting**

- Monitor local newspaper and television newscasts to ascertain community or media reaction.
- Consider detailing quality, field-based office outreach professionals.
- Prepare a written summary of issues of concern, suggestions, and/or questions raised by attendees and recorded at the meeting. Distribute this summary report to all meeting participants, policy-makers (both attending and non-attending), and all other interested parties. Consider placing a copy in a local library or posting on a Web site.
- Encourage agency representatives, local sponsors, and host(s) to get together immediately to process meeting results quickly and compare notes on the next step(s).
- Use effective evaluation instruments to gauge success of outreach initiative within the community (e.g., surveys, polls, mailed questionnaires, etc.).
- Keep going back to the community to earn trust and show willingness to continue listening and learning.
- Always provide answers to questions on a timely basis.

## **Conclusion**

Careful planning and commitment to the above recommendations will vastly improve community outreach initiatives addressing sensitive public policy issues. Planning and implementing a successful community outreach strategy is not easy, but it is essential for effective long-term community buy-in. Some conflict cannot be completely resolved. Even in these cases, however, state and federal agencies should heed the above outreach tips so as to not add to the conflict through poor planning and poor communication.

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