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Conducting Public Hearings: Choosing the Model That's Right for Your Agency

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Critical to proper planning in parks and recreation is gathering and understanding the thoughts of the citizens that that agency serves. This aspect is so important that most proposed projects require that some sort of public input process occur, be recorded and hopefully used by the agency. The collection of public input has become so common place and the pressure on agency personnel so great that, at times, we do not always attend to the needed details of this valuable citizen based effort. This is sometimes true of our use of the public hearing process. It may even be possible that over time we have forgotten the basics of the public hearing process.

The purpose of this article is to review the four types of public hearing models and to remind ourselves of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

1. The Open Forum Format: Citizens attend a public hearing that is widely announced and they are free to participate if they choose. The topic of the hearing is general in nature and citizens express what views they desire to share. It is not uncommon for time limits to be set on the length of this type of meeting.
2. The Discussion Focused Model: In this type of public hearing, citizens are invited to participate in a discussion about a specific topic. Citizens are invited through announcements or by invitation. Dialogue, discussion

and perhaps debate are the hallmarks of this type of meeting. Usually these input sessions involve fewer citizens and are round table in format.

3. The Presentation Based Approach: Citizens are invited to a public hearing that is either widely or narrowly announced and are generally free to ask questions and make comments after a presentation is made. The topic of the hearing is specific and is structured so that a presentation is the centerpiece. Time limits are placed on the length of the presentation and the question and answer session that follows.
4. The Priority Setting Method: Citizens are gathered together, listen to a presentation, participate in some discussion and question and answer process and are then given the task to vote or prioritize those elements of the proposal felt to be most important to them as citizens. The voting/prioritization process is exciting for the citizens but must be carefully controlled by the administrator.

Purposes and Objectives

Each of these public-hearing models has different purposes and objectives. In the open forum format, citizens are primarily given the opportunity to listen to others and to share comments if they chose. In the discussion focus model, agency personnel usually invite a few citizens to gather and to discuss a very specific question that is before the community. In the presentation-based approach, the agency is hopeful that citizens will respond to the thinking of a proposed action that usually requires specific presentation details, like maps or policy statements. In the priority setting method, the intent is that the citizens will actually render a vote or establish a priority to a set of possibilities that the agency is considering.

Announcement and Setting

As can be seen, each of the various public hearing styles requires a different set of announcement and invitation procedures. Because these formats have different purposes, detail must be applied to who comes and how the physical arrangements are set.

For example, in the open forum format, usually citizen invitations come by newspaper announcements and flyers. The announcement must convey to the citizen that the purpose of the public hearing is to receive input from the citizens at large. The number of citizens that will attend is not known so agency personnel should anticipate a location that is public, accessible and

has sufficient space. Usually a microphone is needed so those citizens that choose to speak can be heard by, not only agency personnel, but by other citizens in attendance.

The discussion focus model usually limits itself to specific invitations of key citizens who are identified, selected and invited to attend the hearing. The letter invitation makes clear that only a few citizens will attend and that citizen based discussion and dialogue is the intended purpose. Agency personnel will have a good idea on the number of citizens who will attend and therefore can arrange for the proper number of chairs and size of table.

The presentation-based approach requires that agency personnel prepare, in advance, materials that will be presented to the citizens. These may be maps, designs, results of a report, proposed policies and the like. If a wide group of citizens are invited, then perhaps several sites in a large room will be necessary where several sets of presentation materials can be displayed and agency personnel available to explain the materials, answer questions and receive feedback. If a fewer number of citizens are invited, then one presentation can be made with a general question and answer session to follow. The size and design of the meeting room will be based on if a large (citywide) or small (neighborhood) number of citizens are invited to attend.

Lastly, the priority setting method usually involves few citizens who have been specifically invited (neighborhood association officers, leaders of a user group, specific residents) and the setting is designed to accommodate significant discussion and then a voting or priority setting mechanism. Citizens are asked to commit time, engage in appropriate debate and then be prepared to set a priority. Agency personnel must be prepared to guide the conversation and have a voting sheet, voting stickers or ranking cards available for these highly committed and well informed citizens. A location that allows for this type of hearing is usually a small conference room.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Each of these different public hearing formats is selected based on what the agency personnel desire to be accomplished. Some models require more effort, time and cost and others yield more specific rather than general results. Each different model has it's own set of strengths and weaknesses.

The open forum format is a quick method of receiving input, is low cost to the sponsor and has simple set up requirements. It is also easy to conduct and to maintain control and is a fair and open public input process. However,

not all citizens will be comfortable speaking in front of other citizens so some participation may be limited. Also, agency personnel do not have control over the quality of the input and citizens might even share inaccurate information. Professional lobbyists may consume the time or intimidate the average citizen. Views shared by citizens at the open forum may not always be typical of the majority of citizens and generally open forums do not provide for agency personnel to give feedback.

The discussion model provides an opportunity to have thinking clarified and this leads to more thoughtful results. The conversation can be controlled and citizens instructed to remain on the topic at hand. Usually citizens force the discussion to remain realistic and other citizens present control the focus of the discussion. Also helpful with this type of format is that many perceptions, thoughts and levels of depth are applied to the discussion. However, it is possible that the main idea of the discussion is rejected at the start of the discussion and a very long and difficult meeting is the result. It is also possible that citizens will want to change the focus of the meeting and leave the proposed topic, ending the meeting in a complaining session.

The presentation-based approach is a quick method of receiving input and is generally simple to set up though some presentation materials may be rather elaborate. Citizens find reacting to a proposed plan to be interesting and usually evoke specific comment. With sufficient support personnel, these types of meetings are easily conducted and controlled. Usually the accuracy of the information is controlled and the citizens have good information to use. However, the time to prepare the presentation materials can be lengthy and perhaps the cost of those materials might be extreme with the need for unusual equipment. It is possible that fewer citizens will attend a presentation-based hearing and it is possible that those who attend don't represent citizens at large.

The priority setting method provides a way for agency personnel to receive specific priority indication from citizens on key elements of a proposal. Citizens who participate in these types of hearings are usually very thoughtful and engage in the process yielding high quality input. Significant citizen's expression that is generally deeper in content is provided and citizens have a tendency to be committed to the decisions that have been made at the end of the hearing. However, significant pre meeting preparation is required to sufficiently conduct a voting styled hearing. Control is essential during this type of meeting because manipulation of the voting process can occur if agency personnel do not control the fairness of the

process. Because of the casting of a vote or establishing a priority, improper pressure may be placed on citizens by other citizens and this must be avoided. Lastly, citizens sometimes misunderstand this type of hearing and believe that if they as citizens set the priority, that in fact, the final decision will have been made. They must be reminded of the advisory nature of the process.

Summary Thoughts

Little is written in the professional literature about conducting public hearings. It seems that we learn how to conduct these meetings by watching our professional colleagues and have a tendency to mirror what we have seen. Of course, this can lead to a positive or negative outcome based on the expertise of our mentors.

Those who desire more detail about the public hearing process are invited to contact PlaySafe LLC at www.playsafe@play-safe.com. You will find a link to a monograph that goes into much more detail on how to conduct public hearings. This resource is provided free of charge by PlaySafe LLC.