

The Use of Charettes as a Public Involvement Tool in Parks and Recreation Planning

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INTRODUCTION

Public input is both a necessary requirement and important ingredient of proper, well thought out and systematic parks and recreation planning. The public participation process is necessary due to the many and varied government ordinances, codes and guidelines that require public involvement as an essential component of the planning program. It is also important based on what may be significant contributions that the valued, highly committed, deeply involved and well informed citizens bring to a better understanding of the proposed project.

There are, of course, many appropriate methods to securing resident, visitor and user thoughts, perceptions, ideas and values. Each of these public involvement models have differing emphasis and concerns. An interesting, enjoyable and also highly informative method of obtaining public involvement is the charette. Like other input models there are important attributes and values to this process but with some limitations. However, on the whole the charette generates rather deep and well thought out citizen reflection by providing the citizens with multiple ways of communicating their thoughts and concerns, while at the same time yielding a rather high level of citizen involvement.

WHAT IS A CHARETTE?

A charette is a public involvement and interaction model that is time and place sensitive relying on verbal, written and graphic inputs; utilizing citizen and staff (or consultant) interactions; shifting through different stages of developing, improving and refining the citizen reflection, thought and decision making process. Perhaps the following breakdown of the key words of the definition of a charette will prove helpful.

- **Public Involvement and Interaction:** One of the important facets of a charette is that it involves the residents, citizens, visitors, leaders or users of the community parks and recreation system in which these individuals are structured into interactive groups, teams or units. In many charettes the citizens are organized into specific work groups with an identifiable and well understood theme.
- **Time and Place Sensitive:** Another necessary dimension of a charette is that the public interacts during a specific identified and usually rather intense time frame in which a predetermined location(s) for the charette is organized. Usually charettes are held on

Friday evenings and part of Saturday or all day Saturday. It is common for a charette to have both a base of operation location as well as citizens bused to various sites to tour and better understand the existing and proposed elements of the planning concept.

- **Verbal, Written and Graphic Inputs:** A unique feature of a charette is that it relies on three ways for the citizens to organize and communicate their thoughts. Typical of most input models is the verbal component. In a charette, besides citizens speaking about their ideas, they are given tools so they can write and have help in drawing or graphically displaying their thoughts. Provided at the meetings are tables with design paper and markers for graphic production as well as large tablets and easels for written work.
- **Citizen and Staff (or Consultant) Interactions:** A basic component of a charette is for the citizens to have easy, comfortable and rather immediate interactions with other residents, citizen teams, professional staff and contracted consultants. An open and continuous interaction using questions and answers, clarification and dialogue, as well as acquiring new and additional information is a prominent part of this type of process.
- **Different Stages of Refinement:** The dynamic element of the charette is hallmarked by citizens working in unison for long periods of time to identify questions, seek answers, develop thoughts, improve and design possibilities and then refine their reflections so the best possible decisions can be offered. Part of the reason that a charette is so time sensitive is that it is necessary for citizens to be in an environment where they have the time, understanding and disposition to engage in a process that will enhance their thoughts.

STEPS TO THE CHARETTE

To successfully use a charette, the parks and recreation professional should have some experience with the charette method before attempting this public participation model. Typical ways to gain this important and necessary background experience include: (1) observing a charette conducted by a different agency than your own and becoming a student of the process watching closely how that agency performed, (2) taking a workshop or short course in charettes from an individual or group with charette experience, or (3) contracting with a consultant that conducts the charette on behalf of your agency in which you observe, participate and receive feedback.

There are ten steps to organizing, conducting and evaluating a well designed charette. Though there can be slight modifications to the following list, for the most part, all of these elements are essential and should occur in the identified and designated order.

1. **Concept:** A necessary step to the organizing of a charette is for the parks and recreation professional staff (or in conjunction with a consultant) to have a clear, concise and agreed upon concept of both the process and desired end results. In most cases the professional staff desire: (1) citizen involvement, (2) meaningful and sensitive participation, (3) accurate and realistic involvement, (4) citizens to have all the necessary information

needed, and (5) participants to make valuable and well thought out suggestions and recommendations. As part of the concept, the professional staff must understand and commit to a specific time frame which will facilitate the possibility of transporting citizens to different locations to see, discuss and question ideas and then conceptualize those ideas onto paper.

- 2. Facilitator(s):** Part of the charette process is the extensive but subtle use of trained charette facilitator(s). Depending on the size and extent of the charette, one to several facilitators will be required. The purpose of the facilitator(s) is to guide the citizens and professional staff through all phases of the charette program including: (1) introduction of the charette process, (2) organizing citizens and professional staff into work teams, (3) assigning each work group or team to a different but important theme area, (4) overseeing the information gathering process (which possibly involves road tours), (5) managing the verbal, written and graphic input components of the citizen groups, and (6) bringing proper closure to each end part of the process and also to the final charette element.
- 3. Time Frame:** As mentioned previously, the time frame of a charette is intense, lengthy and a critical component to the success of the public participation vision. Experience has taught that most citizens are willing to participate in a charette if it is held on a Friday evening and a Saturday morning or if it is an all day Saturday only experience. Other time frames are possible but less likely to obtain the intensity of citizen input desired. A charette is divided into several phases. Generally, a portion of time is dedicated to introducing the citizens to the concept of a charette. Then citizens are divided into work groups based on citizen interest or community planning needs. This requires discussion and decision making time. A training session occurs, usually involving numerous questions and answers, to help citizens learn how to effectively participate in the charette process. Then a series of work sessions occur in which specific goals are to be accomplished by certain time frames. Searching for needed information during these sessions generally takes place. Transporting citizens to various site locations may also be a significant part of the time process. Organizing the citizen thinking by verbal, written and graphic means is a critical time element. Lastly, a summary and closure experience is necessary.
- 4. Place:** A charette will need a location that allows for large size open discussions, small group table based work, space for displays, map layouts, and can be secured for breaks, overnight security, lunches and off site tours. The location needs to be available for the entire charette experience so there is continuity in the ability of the citizens to think and process. Of course restrooms, drinking fountains, table and chairs and parking are necessary for a quality experience. If off site tours are a part of the charette, then those sites are part of the “place” concept. Because the number of charette participants will be known before the event, then the size of the locations can be easily estimated. This is also true of the tour component. It is important for the professional staff to accurately time the drive to the tour sites, visit duration and return home so that the process is not jeopardized by time crunches.

- 5. Pre-Event Materials:** In order for the charette to have the depth of meaning for citizens, key pre-event materials are necessary to be identified, located, designed, obtained, brought to and displayed at the charette site. One of the purposes of this type of public participation process is to make available to the citizens and professional staff all of information sets that are necessary to make well informed realistic decisions. It is common for pre-event materials to consist of: (1) citizen surveys of identified priorities, (2) location maps of current and proposed sites, (3) conceptual drawings of improvements or new developments, and (4) an array of photographs that assist in viewing existing and potential site locations.
- 6. Invitations:** A key feature of a charette is that those citizens participating are identified based on some index of importance to the parks and recreation department and then invited to participate in the process. Because the charette requires a time and intensity investment on the part of citizens, only those individuals that are highly committed and well informed are suitable for this critical public input process. The parks and recreation department must identify citizens that have the ability to dive into the process, remain committed and can contribute deep thinking on behalf of the citizens as a whole.
- 7. Script:** The professional staff (or consultant) that is hosting and conducting the charette should have the entire process scripted out. The results and various nuances of the program will be unknown, but it is important to organize, plan, design and anticipate certain known elements. The citizens will need to be organized into theme-based work groups; such as, youth programs, services for the disabled, high adventure based facilities, competitive sport facilities or whatever seems to be appropriate for the needs of the agency. The physical set up of the charette should be designed, practiced and a “dry run” made to ensure the space and equipment needs are acceptable. The time frame of the different stages of the process should be decided, discussed and agreed on. Reality constraints will need to be discussed by the professional staff before the event so that a clear and accurate picture can be presented to citizens. Such constraints as budgets, land availability and the like will need to be known so that proper structure is brought to the process.
- 8. Charting Process:** The primary purpose of the charette is to receive the best thinking of the invited citizen. They will have worked long hours involved in intense discussions, writing assignments and developing design scenarios to be of assistance. It is critical that the hosts of the charette have created ways for these responses to be charted and reviewed. Because the charette involves verbal discussions, writing activities and graphic designs the charting process must connect to those elements.
- 9. Closure:** A critical step in the charette is the closure. The citizens, professional staff and consultants will have invested much in this intense effort. It is important that both “content” closure and “process” or psychological closure be provided. Toward the end of the charette, the facilitator brings all groups together to “melt” the thinking perspectives and ideas. It is similar to a group sharing time where presentations are made, questions are answered and some validation of ideas is made. Citizens will be interested in having some idea of what will happen to all their ideas. As part of the closure process, the

citizens need to know how their efforts will be integrated into the final plan for the community.

- 10. Evaluation:** Lastly, all participants in the charette should take time to complete some type of formal evaluation tool or devise. Each part of the charette (steps 1-10) could serve as the evaluation categories. Besides some type of rating scale, open ended questions should be provided for more in-depth comments. After the charette participant evaluation, the host and facilitator(s) of the charette should also meet, and evaluate and debrief the experience.

BENEFITS OF THE CHARETTE

As can be noted from the foregoing, a charette represents a serious commitment for all parties involved. It would seem that some rather substantial values or benefits should emerge from the process to justify the effort. The following are some benefits and values that are part of using the model:

- The process will solicit from citizens, professional staff and others their best thinking that is thoughtful, deep, relevant and well measured.
- After participation in the charette model, a common statement made by the involved citizen is one of commitment to the results of the process. These citizens serve as powerful voices to councils and commissions about the results of the work.
- The citizens, professional staff (and consultants) leave the charette with a shared vision of where the parks and recreation department should head, its priorities and specific nuances of the vision.
- Local knowledge and experience that can come only from long term, well informed and highly committed citizens has a place and a way to be captured. An agency will hear and see from citizens their special and critical knowledge that better informs the decision makers.
- Direct, measurable and priority based results emerge from the charette. What is achieved is more than rapid-fire opinion but is deliberated and worked over, knowledge based decisions that have been placed in order of importance context.
- One concern that agency personnel have is that the citizens will not understand the constraints of reality. Once informed of budgets, mission statements, existing ordinances and the like citizens provide a powerful reality check and help to settle rather difficult priority questions.
- The interactive process of citizens, professional staff, (consultants), work teams and the verbal, written and graphic inputs improve the overall thinking of the individual parties and a synergy elevates the quality output.

- The charette serves as a substantial community validation of the planning decisions that have been made. The parks and recreation agency has a rather powerful sense of security in moving forward with the implementation components of the planning process.

CONCLUSION

A charette is an interesting, enjoyable and informative method of public participation that yields well founded results. This venue requires front end planning, but the quality of the citizen and professional staff output justifies the time and labor effort.

The host of the charette should be committed to this type of public participation process and have had some experience with this venue before engaging in this method. Involving the citizens is at the heart of the charette and their commitment is critical.

With all of its values and cautions, a charette is certainly a vital and meaningful option for public participation. Feel free to contact playsafe@play-safe.com for additional information and assistance in conducting a charette.