

UTAH LEISURE INSIGHTS MAGAZINE

FALL 2008

The Focus Group Process in Parks and Recreation Planning

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Capturing public input is a helpful and critical element of proper parks and recreation planning. The public can provide vital, direct and meaningful input that allows the planner to consider future decision making actions with greater security and accuracy. Public involvement techniques can help define user wants, desires, needs, priorities, participation and satisfaction levels. Any or all of this type of data is informative for planning purposes. If the assessment device is constructed as such, vital geographic and demographic information can be obtained. When superimposed over other information, such as new program desires, very specific management decisions can be made. Good management strategy and policy development is based on accurate and current public input, and those policies that clearly reflect the needs of citizens coupled with agency resources are most likely to have meaning. Most planning studies use citizen involvement as a critical element in designing for the future. After all, the planning should mirror the community context for which the plan is designed. Public involvement can come through a variety of different methods (telephone calls, mail-out surveys, on-site questionnaires, door-to-door interviews, public hearings, etc.) each with its particular set of strengths and concerns. Re-emerging as a popular approach is the PUBLIC FOCUS GROUP method. This process consists of asking highly-committed and well-informed citizens to spend an evening discussing, debating and then prioritizing pre-determined parks and recreation issues that are deemed critical by the parks and recreation professional staff. These issues might be generated by the professional staff as would questions used for the other survey and questionnaire methods or in conjunction with a citizen advisory committee or technical assistance team. Each issue is placed on an 8 ½ x 11 index card and as the citizens discuss, with the help of a trained facilitator, the various merits of importance of each issue the cards are continually readjusted on a table or bulletin board in a line-of-priority order until the citizens are satisfied that the issues are in the most appropriate priority order. This process allows large groups of citizens to focus on highly complex issues in a short period of time under a controlled environment with a high degree of citizen involvement and commitment.

The public focus group is an excellent blend between the traditional public hearing and the common survey approach to collecting citizen input. The public hearing allows citizens to express views in an open forum which provides important perspectives for planners to hear. However, at times public hearings get derailed on issues brought up by the strongest and loudest voices in the meeting and it is very possible that the information brought forward is so varied and individual that it can not be tabulated and no clear trends emerge. The survey is used to control

the specific information that the planners need (by asking very specific questions on the survey form) and hence tabulation and trends, if any, clearly emerge. In fact, if demographic and geographic information is asked, then the trend can become very neighborhood or citizen specific. However, the survey is usually filled out by citizens in isolation (in their home with little or no interaction with others) and the very important hearing and sharing of divergent views is missed. The public focus group brings together both needed elements: control by dealing with pre-determined issues (the same as the survey questions) and active dialogue by encouraging citizens to discuss and debate those issues from their unique vantage points. Previous research has illustrated the successful use of the focus group method in which a wide array of issues and groups has been studied. Specifically such concepts as; market research, nutrition, nursing, community colleges, TV commercials, supermarkets, pharmacy education, employee relations, public relations, high-risk families and libraries have found the focus group process helpful.

- **PUBLIC FOCUS GROUP MODEL**

This method has its own set of strengths and concerns, but depending on the circumstances of the community, the citizens, local issues, time frames and such it can be a viable mechanism for helpful public input. Public focus groups generally are inexpensive (usually the cost of a public meeting space and a trained facilitator) and allow for a high level of control of public input, that is, the citizens are focused on the pre-determined issues, not personal or hidden agendas that sometimes emerge during public hearing styled meetings. They also elicit usable, detailed and comparable information such as the relative importance of one community issue over another. Additionally, these types of meetings help to inform citizens of issues, share information that might make for a better informed citizenry and can help to identify new issues of concern not previously known by the professional staff. Experience has also shown that people involved in focus groups feel better about citizen involvement, more committed to the decision made and become active voices for the implementation of the decision making process. However, public focus groups can not entertain all issues of concern, and so some citizens might feel frustrated if an item of specific concern to them was not dealt with. Related to this might be a citizen who attempts to introduce a new issue that the citizen feels is of equal or greater importance than the predetermined issues brought before the group. Also, by the very nature of the citizen discussion, debate and prioritization process of the meetings, some citizens dominate the conversation, attempt to overly influence others in the group and might even frustrate the purpose of the focus group. It should be recognized that not all parks and recreation issues important to citizens can be included in the focus groups, and so opportunities need to exist after the meetings for citizens to discuss with professional staff these additional and different issues. One of the key components to making the process work is an experienced facilitator who can control the direction of the meeting and handle unrelated interests.

The following is an overview of the six steps necessary to conduct a focus group.

FIRST, it is necessary to establish a team of professional staff members, a citizen advisory committee and a technical team that assists with the identification, discussion and wording of the parks and recreation issues. The professional staff, of course, bring their professional expertise, their views from the day to day operation of the program and services and a long term career

sense of what they perceive to be the critical issues for the future. The citizen advisory group represents the citizens at large and should be selected to represent the citizenry geographically and demographically and provide the perspective of users and potential users of the current and proposed programs and services. The technical team is a helpful group of professionally trained public service employees from sister agencies and those organizations that might be impacted in some way by the future actions of the agency sponsoring the focus groups. These team members generally bring professional expertise coupled with experiences from interaction with their constituency that is of assistance to this process. As these groups meet, their purpose is to identify all the parks and recreation issues that seem important to the future of the community. The issues should be discussed until the group feels comfortable that they have sorted out the most critical issues and then work to word the issues in such a way that citizens can understand, debate, and eventually prioritize those issues. The issues will and should be different for each community.

SECOND, the teams that develop the issues need to work hard to limit the final critical issue list to 15-20 items. Experience has taught that citizens are not able to concentrate on any more issues than this at one meeting. Besides the mental fatigue that sets in, citizens are either unable or unwilling to spend more than two hours in an evening at a public focus meeting. The number of issues dealt with and time frame allotted to discuss and prioritize effect the quality of both the process and the end results. Additionally, there may be great variations in the number of citizens who attend and participate in a focus group meeting, and extending beyond 20 issues usually excludes a large number of citizens from effectively participating.

THIRD, a series of public focus group meetings that are convenient for citizens to attend should be set up. Of course the time of day, location of the meetings, appropriate announcement of the meetings and avoiding conflict with other community events are important considerations. Most communities have found an evening time frame has the greatest likelihood of convenience for citizens. Holding the meeting at public facilities avoids cost to the community and generally provides easy access for citizens while being geographically approximate and recognizable structures to the citizenry. The specific dates selected need to be advertised well in advance so that individual citizens and citizen groups can make necessary arrangements to attend and help to avoid known community calendar conflicts.

FOURTH, a concerted effort needs to be made to announce, invite and assure good attendance from citizens or their representatives. Public focus groups are based more on the quality of the participation in the process than the number of citizens who choose to participate; nevertheless, great effort should be made to activate as many citizens as possible. For those focus group meetings held in different geographic regions of the community, it is helpful to use neighborhood associations, public newsletters and announcements from special interest groups that serve or are in that neighborhood region to inform the citizens. Using the standard public notice system (radio and newspapers) is also helpful, but the goal is to assure that highly-committed and well-informed citizens attend and actively participate in this process. For the group-specific focus groups, phone calls and written invitations can be used. It is not uncommon

for sponsors of public focus groups to invite specific individuals, representatives of different community organizations, art alliances and the like to send representatives to participate in the focus groups. Generally, typical public focus groups will have a combination of interested citizens as well as representatives from the specific community that join together to attempt to melt a common priority view of the issues. As a caution, the professional staff should work to keep special interest views balanced through the invitation process.

FIFTH and most difficult step is the proper facilitation of the public focus group sessions. It is certainly possible that one of the professional staff can conduct and facilitate the meetings. However, it is not uncommon to use an outside consultant or trained communication specialist to handle the actual sessions. Depending on the issues that are developed and the political nature of the community, it may be essential that an individual with appropriate distance from the agency lead the sessions. The focus groups usually start with the facilitator explaining to the participants the purpose and goals of the public focus group concept and how the process is to be conducted with that group. Most citizens find this an interesting process and emerge with a real sense of involvement in the community decision-making process. Next is a presentation of the predetermined issues to those in attendance; the use of a presentation projector is an effective method. It is necessary to answer those questions that emerge from the general overview of issues, but the facilitator must be careful not to imply value or judgment on any of the issues. The issues are presented in a no-particular-order process with equal value implied for each issue. The citizens are then arranged so they can sit around a large table or bulletin board with a clear view of the issues that are printed on the index cards. The arrangement of the citizens is such that all must feel equal in their vantage point and ability to participate. If a particularly large group of citizens come to a meeting (generally greater than 30), it is necessary to have multiple facilitators and then to average the different groups prioritizations together at the end of the sessions. The citizens are led through the initial discussion phase of the issues which usually consists of getting the citizens to agree to a *high, medium, and low* value of the issues and placing together the issue cards grouped by this value system. Then the citizens are led through the first wave of prioritization which asks them to rank the issues within the low value category of issues. By physically moving the cards it is much easier for the citizens to see how that complex issue relates to other complex issues. Starting with the lower priority issues first usually helps the group effort move more efficiently. The greater discussions and debates occur with the higher ranked items. This is a difficult task for citizens and usually much discussion, debate and temporary agreement of rank order emerge. This is one of the great values of the public focus group process, because citizens are wrestling with the same key issues that professional staff must consider and citizens are able to share their views, listen to new perspectives of other citizens and to alter their opinions. The citizens are then led through the final refinement phase (again, by physically moving the cards at the citizens' request) which requires that the citizens agree on the final priority order of all issues. Again, this is usually a very difficult process because it requires some citizens to compromise, but again the purpose of the focus group is to help professional staff understand what the citizens value. During these various decision making phases, it is important that the facilitator maintain control of the process so that high quality decisions emerge and the participating citizens feel valued. Lastly, the facilitator then concludes the meeting, helps to make sure the emotional and intellectual process is ready to end and makes

arrangements for citizens that have new or different issues from the predetermined ones have an opportunity to discuss those with professional staff after the meeting ends.

SIXTH, it is then important and necessary to analyze and share the information that has been gleaned from the focus group process. One of the attributes of this method is that the results are easily understood and presented and do not require any sophisticated statistical manipulation. If the community conducts one public focus group, then the results consist of the rank order of issues as decided by those citizens. If several sessions are conducted due to different geographic regions within the community or specific set of citizens exclusively participated (such as a neighborhood association or specific sport organization), then the results can be either from the group or a blend of several groups together.

Public focus groups are an effective means of obtaining public input that is generally inexpensive, relatively rapid and engenders high citizen involvement and usually solid citizen commitment. Of course, it is not appropriate in all communities or for all circumstances, but its use has increased in popularity primarily due to its effectiveness as a planning tool.

If further information concerning focus groups is of interest, please contact
PlaySafe, LLC at www.play-safe.com.