

COMMUNITY CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GUIDE

Purpose: This guide explains the types of, and requirements for, public participation in planning projects. It should be used to determine the public participation techniques that will work best for your community and project. These techniques you use for your project will affect your project budget.

Purpose of the Public Participation Process

A critical element of any planning project is to determine the public's recreational needs and interests. Through a well-designed public participation process; the attributes, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of community residents are identified. Also, involving residents in the beginning of a project assists with decreasing opposition and increasing volunteer participation. After years of funding planning projects, The Bureau has found that substantial public involvement at the planning stage increases the likelihood that recreation projects will go beyond the planning stage to implementation. These experiences have prompted the Bureau to require significant public participation throughout the planning process.

Through previously funded projects, we have found that public participation is important because it:

- Provides the community residents and community leaders an opportunity to voice their opinions;
- Informs the elected officials of citizen attitudes and needs;
- Helps to express broad-based public support for the planning process and the plan proposals; and,
- Provides the general public and community leaders with an opportunity to support and be involved with the execution of the plan.

Public Participation Techniques

There are many techniques that communities have used to involve their residents in a planning project. The Bureau encourages communities to be creative and try new approaches. Feel free to propose new approaches that you feel will work in your community. The Bureau requires that several means of public participation be used in the planning process; the most commonly used techniques include the following:

- A Study Committee
- Advertised or promoted general public meetings
- Key person interviews
- A citizen survey

- Provide an electronic copy of the draft plan on the grantee's website (if available) for public review and comment.

For most planning projects, the Bureau requires the creation of a study committee. Additional public participation requirements are detailed in the project specific General Information and Scope of Work Guidelines that are available from the Bureau.

Below is a discussion on the techniques outlined above:

1. **Study Committee**

The Bureau requires the creation of a Study Committee for the following reasons:

- a. The Committee provides a structured decision-making resource for the planning process.
- b. A variety of opinions from different interests reveal the most options and after a leader is selected the structure encourages open discussion.
- c. Committee members often serve in a volunteer capacity.

In order to build a strong and successful Committee the grantee needs to consider the following recommendations:

- a. Rarely should this committee include just current board members and/or grantee staff. Whether a local board is active or not, it is best to reach out to the community to find dedicated people who are willing to work on a separate, short-term project.
- b. Seek out residents who believe in the project and are willing to make the time for it.
- c. It is important to have sufficient representation of the community's park and recreation needs and to build broad based support for the planning process, plan proposals and implementation. Consider including on the Study Committee, members who represent the following positions in the community:
 - A few members from the park and recreation board, environmental council, etc.
 - At least one local elected official
 - At least one member from school district board or administration or faculty
 - A religious leader
 - One member from grantee's staff (municipal manager, park and rec. dept., etc.)
 - One member of local or regional planning commission
 - Consider representation from the county/regional parks and recreation department or other applicable county/regional agency

- Representatives of the business community, i.e. chamber of commerce, real estate developers, bankers etc.
- Others to consider: students, youth sports groups, senior citizen groups, apartment complex owners/operators, etc.

It is also important to have all major neighborhoods and areas in the community represented. The goal should be to provide a diverse base of individuals to assist in developing the plan so that all aspects and interests are taken into consideration in developing the plan.

d. To build a strong committee and achieve results:

- Appoint a leader with good organizational and communication skills. Ordinarily, the person is the local project coordinator.
- Prepare and distribute agendas, along with any handouts, prior to the meeting.
- Initiate clear, factual and direct communications.
- Hold "workshop meetings" where there is no need for motions, votes, etc. (the object is to build consensus and support for final recommendations)
- Encourage teamwork – Ask the question, “What can we do to solve this problem together?”
- Designate responsibilities based on individual strengths and weaknesses -- everyone should feel like they are contributing to the effort.
- Stay focused - don't dwell on the past but encourage viable solutions and “think out of the box”.

2. **Advertised or Promoted General Public Meetings**

The purpose of these meetings is to gather information from residents about their attitudes and interests as well as getting their reactions to the project's findings and recommendations. For projects that impact the entire community, both community-wide and neighborhood meetings are often held. For park master site plans and feasibility studies that directly affect specific neighborhoods, meetings on proposed plans should be held close to affected neighborhoods. An effort should be made to alert adjacent property owners of the meetings and encourage their attendance.

Neighborhood meetings can be more convenient for the residents to attend and provide opportunity to focus on some issues that directly affect the neighborhood as well as addressing municipal-wide concerns. If you conduct a series of neighborhood meetings, results must be integrated so that the final plan is a strategy for the entire municipality, not separate and fragmented blueprints for individual neighborhoods.

Attendance at public meetings is usually small and, therefore, results should be kept in perspective with regard to the overall planning process. To increase your meeting attendance requires considerable organizational effort. Following are guidelines to increase attendance and conduct effective public meetings.

a. Plan your meeting in advance.

- Determine purpose
- Select target group
- Set date
- Get meeting place
- Send out "eye-catching" invitations, announcements, flyers -- place add in newspaper -- write press releases, make phone calls, send emails.
- Make personal phone calls to key community and neighborhood leaders
- Prepare agenda and decide in advance meeting leadership roles (local committee, consultant, and elected officials)

b. Holding the meeting.

- Serve refreshments
- Arrive early to set up and provide a sign-up sheet with addresses noted
- Arrange seating
- Welcome people
- Begin on time, end on time
- Explain the meeting format

3. **Key Person Interviews**

The purpose of key person interviews is to give community leaders (beyond the elected officials) an opportunity to voice their concerns and respond to a standard set of questions. This engages these individuals, with substantial influence in the community, in the planning process. Depending on the project the Bureau recommends a minimum number of individual interviews to be conducted, typically between 15 and 25.

a. Key individuals, **not** part of your Steering Committee, who should be interviewed include:

- Elected officials
- School district administrators
- Police chiefs
- Service club leaders
- Religious leaders
- Chamber of commerce/business leaders
- Non-profit administrators (scouts, Y's)
- Key recreation personnel
- For-profit recreation facility owners
- Business leaders such as major employers, bank presidents, real estate developers, etc.
- User group administrators

b. Commonly asked questions include:

- What age groups appear to be least/best served in your area?
- Are there any additions or changes that you feel could improve recreation opportunities?
- Are there any additions or changes that you feel could improve park facilities?
- What key issues are facing the provision of recreation opportunities in your community?
- How do you feel about the possibilities of cooperation with the school district to provide more recreation opportunities?
- What economic benefit do you feel this opportunity will create?

4. **Citizen Survey**

A random sample survey of a community's citizens is an effective way to gather valid input and opinions from all segments of the community if conducted in a statistically valid manner. Conducting a survey can be expensive and time consuming but well worth the cost for these reasons:

- a. This is the only means of collecting data and opinions representing all residents.
- b. Even with a low response rate, you hear from more residents than any other method; particularly public meetings where typically less than 50 people attend.
- c. Results can be more accurate and powerful than other methods.

Communities interested in this option should seek out consulting firms that have considerable expertise in this area.

The Bureau can provide additional information and sample surveys upon request. Below is an overview of issues to consider before conducting a citizen survey.

- a. Conduct a random sample of your community rather than mailing to all households for these reasons:
 - It is more cost-effective to devise a good questionnaire that will generate a high response rate from a smaller group of people, rather than on a massive printing and mailing of a poorly-designed survey to a larger group of people that few may complete and return.
 - Mailing to everyone through a newsletter or utility bill lacks a scientific and mathematical method. Response rates are usually less than 10% and there is no way of knowing if those who choose to respond are representative of the entire population. There is also a strong possibility of bias in the survey results.
- b. Sample size:

- The general rule is that the accuracy of the survey increases as the size of the sample approximates the size of the general population. However, once the sample size gets beyond 500, increasing the sample size usually adds little to the accuracy of the survey results.
 - It is typically recommended that 10% of the households are sampled and follow-ups are made to obtain at least 500 survey responses, especially if you require information at the neighborhood level. For subgroups being surveyed, such as neighborhoods, you should seek to receive at least 100 survey responses from each.
 - The larger the targeted population, the less cost-effective it is to produce a survey.
- c. Obtaining a random sample:
- Tax billing lists can be obtained from your municipality, school district, tax collector, or perhaps the county real estate assessment office. If you have access to a computer spreadsheet program that has a random number selection function then each household can be assigned a number (1, 2, 3, etc.) that can be used to select numbers at random.
- d. Ensuring an adequate response rate:
- For mail questionnaire, a response rate of 25% would be considered high. You can usually increase this number by:
 - Developing an attractive/professionally prepared questionnaire;
 - Conducting several follow-up (postcard, second mailing, calls);
 - Providing return postage; and/or
 - Giving respondents an incentive to respond like coupons or a raffle.
 - Hand deliver surveys with scheduled pick-up. If possible, wait while they complete the survey.
 - Consider using telephone interviews. One data center gains access to phone numbers, including unlisted numbers, and its' computer randomly selects numbers based on zip codes. The challenge is that if a community has a lot of zip codes, it probably is not cost-effective. For example, in one community, 423 eligible calls were made and 360 interviews conducted. This represented an 85% response with a 5.2% sampling error. Note: This method excludes residents who have cell phones rather than land lines.
- e. Designing your questionnaire:
- During your consultant selection process, request perspective consultants to provide samples of past surveys along with the response rates received.
 - Suggestions for survey questionnaire design:
 - Make it attractive and easy to read with lots of white space.
 - Start with the easy questions first; more difficult ones later.
 - Include a question that gauges willingness to pay.
 - Clearly explain the importance and purpose of the survey and express appreciation for completing at both the beginning and end of the questionnaire.

- Provide space for a respondent to sign up for volunteering.
- Place demographic questions at the beginning or end.
- For questions with long checklists, require only the top three choices.
- Include "agree/disagree" type questions for issues that don't fit into categories.

f. Survey costs:

- Are determined by the sample size and methods(s) chosen to follow.
- Printing of questionnaires, envelopes, return postcards, and follow-up postcards, postage, tabulation, analysis and report of a survey for 2,000 persons can cost between \$8,000 and \$12,000.

Special Note on Comprehensive Recreation, Open Space and Greenway Plan Adoption

A comprehensive recreation, open space, and greenway plan is an official document that, in part, dictates municipal policy and decisions regarding land use. For that reason, the Bureau encourages municipalities to follow adoption procedures listed in the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code, section 302, "Adoption of the Comprehensive Plan." These procedures require a formal public hearing as part of the plan adoption process with a 45-day review period. A copy of the plan must be sent to all adjacent municipalities and the school district.

Attached is a chart that shows the desired outcomes for various citizen participation techniques.

Citizen Participation

Public Participation Mechanisms/Techniques

Desired Outcomes ↓↓↓↓↓	Public Meeting*	Work Forum	Press Release	Target Newsletter	Steering Committee	Adopt** Program	Special Events	Partnerships
Inform the public about watershed planning · Increase awareness of Dept. efforts	■	■	■	■				
Planning: Design stream protection programs people want · Assess needs · Meet special needs · Prioritize needs	■	■	■	■	■			
Build support for initiatives · Lobbying · Consensus building	■		■	■		■	■	■
Fund-raising			■	■	■	■	■	■
Improve Service Delivery through volunteers · Stream Maintenance · Stream Patrols · Program Leaders	■		■	■		■	■	■

Squares (■) represent the most appropriate techniques to achieve desired outcomes.

*Public Meetings: We recommend an "open" meeting structure; **"public" hearings are not an effective way to obtain public input.** Hearings are simply the formal, and often legal, means of ratifying an agreement. The purpose of an "open meeting is to focus on an agenda of work to be accomplished. Residents are given the ability, possibility, and opportunity to participate rather than being told the results.

**Adopt Programs: This category consists of Stream Bank Fencing and Adopt-a-Stream Programs, or Friends of the Trail initiatives.